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To cite this article: Yan Danni Liang, Yumei Yang, Lei Xu & Jeff Bray (02 Jul 2026): Understanding the role of student recruitment agencies: a service provider for both higher education institutions and students, Journal of Further and Higher Education, DOI: [10.1080/0309877X.2026.2694718](https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2026.2694718)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2026.2694718>



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Published online: 02 Jul 2026.



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Understanding the role of student recruitment agencies: a service provider for both higher education institutions and students

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ABSTRACT

This study delves into the impact of international student recruitment agencies on the mobility of Chinese students to UK higher education institutions. It seeks to uncover how these agencies shape student decision-making and their broader implications for educational institutions. Adopting a qualitative research approach, this study conducted 27 interviews with recruitment agents in China, employing thematic analysis to dissect the intricate relationship between students, Higher Education (HE) institutions, and recruitment agencies. This methodology was strategically selected to provide deep insights of the detailed interactions and connections within the international education recruitment network. The findings reveal crucial roles of recruitment agencies as specialists, decision influencers, and information exchangers in the context of international education. These agencies are central to the communication between students and universities, significantly contributing to the value creation process. They operate within a tripartite framework where international students are seen as customers, higher education institutions act as service providers to these students and as clients to the agencies. Recruitment agencies thus serve a dual role, catering to both higher education institutions and international students, bridging fundamental gaps in information and decision-making processes. This study innovatively extends the Value Creation Model by introducing a new theoretical framework that thoroughly explores the mediating role of recruitment agents within the higher education sector. This research provides valuable insights for HE institutions on the importance of working collaboratively with recruitment agencies, thus enriching the academic discourse on international student recruitment strategies.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 10 April 2024
Accepted 13 June 2026

KEYWORDS

Recruitment agencies; higher education institutions; value creation; international students

1. Introduction and background

Recruiting non-English speaking students to UK universities has become a highly competitive export market, driven by the growing participation of countries like China and

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Malaysia in the international student sector. Among the global international student market, China is a significant market for UK Higher Education (HE) institutions. According to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), China is the second largest source of international students to the UK market after India. A total of 154,260 Chinese students enrolled in higher education institutions in the UK (Higher Education Statistics Agency [HESA], 2024).

Thanks to the rapid development of the Chinese economy, the number of Chinese students coming to the UK is steadily increasing (a small decline during the covid-19 pandemic excepted). There are three key reasons why the UK is one of the most popular destinations for Chinese students. Firstly, linguistic, English-speaking Countries are the preferred choices for Chinese students due to the languages wide use globally (Counsell 2011). Secondly, the UK has a strong reputation in Higher Education sector globally (Cebolla-Boado, Hu, and Soysal 2018), and thirdly, the recently revived Skilled Worker visa scheme provides opportunities for graduates to work in the UK on the conclusion of their studies to gain working experience.

Both a declining population of 18–24-year-olds in the UK, as reported by the Office for National Statistics (ONS 2025) and growth of alternative study routes such as apprenticeships (UK Department for Education, 2025) have caused tension in university recruitment. Consequently, UK universities have become increasingly reliant on the income generated from international students. In 2019, international recruitment agencies supported the enrolment of more than 40% of all new international students to universities in the UK with some universities relying almost entirely on agencies to achieve their annual enrolment numbers (Raimo and Huang 2020). Competition in this market is intensifying as universities in other non-English speaking countries such as Germany and France are increasingly offering courses delivered and assessed in English. Further, the Chinese government recently launched a ‘study in China plan’ aiming to retain Chinese students at domestic Universities and increase the number of overseas students who are attracted to study at Chinese Universities. According to the Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China (MEPRC), China has overtaken the UK to become the second largest international student market after the USA (MEPRC 2018). In January 2024, the UK government ceased issuing visas that allowed international students to bring dependents with them, resulting in a more than 40% decline in enrolment for postgraduate taught master’s courses in 2024 compared to 2023 (Adams 2024).

Due to the reasons outlined, it is imperative for UK universities to find an effective way to recruit international students, particularly from one of the key markets, China. In comparison with other international student markets, existing studies reveal that recruitment agencies are one of the main information sources for Chinese students when it comes to selecting a university to study (James-MacEachern and Yun 2017). In this paper, we contribute to the literature by discussing the roles international recruitment agencies play in the context of increasing international mobility. Agent service has been widely studied in service industries, such as real estate (Dabholkar and Overby 2006), travel (L. Huang 2008), and labour (Soltani et al. 2009). Due to the importance of agencies in recruiting international students, a small number of previous studies have investigated the role of agencies in students’ choice of study University. Previous studies have principally highlighted that international recruitment agencies are the main source of information exchange (Pimpa 2003; Sarkar and Perényi 2017) and that they help to translate

documents, prepare language tests and provide support with the application processes (Hagedorn and Zhang 2011). It is notable that these previous studies have examined the student's perspective. In addition, Nikula and Kivistö (2018) revealed that the use of third-party education agents in international student recruitment is a widely adopted market entry strategy. However, there is a need for greater oversight of these agents. The study conducted by Nikula and Kivistö (2020) emphasised that education providers should not only refine and intensify existing monitoring techniques but also adopt new strategies to ensure transparency and accountability in agents' practices. Although previous studies have examined recruitment agencies from various perspectives, the roles of these agencies in working with both students and UK higher education institutions remain insufficiently understood; a gap this study addresses. This research develops an in-depth understanding of agents' perspectives on their roles in facilitating the recruitment process for Chinese students pursuing education in the UK. By exploring their multiple roles, this study provides new insights into how recruitment agencies contribute to student mobility and university engagement in an increasingly market-driven higher education landscape.

With the marketisation of HE, there is a need to review the relationship between recruitment agencies, HE institutions and students from a marketing perspective. Most previous publications examining the international student market focus on studying dyadic relationship between universities and students; rarely is the triadic relationship between universities, students, and recruitment agencies fully considered. HE is a service industry offering academic education, career and technical services to students. Grönroos-Voima's value creation model (Grönroos 2017) drawing from marketing studies may provide insight into the nature of the value contribution and how this value is created in the sector. By extending Grönroos-Voima's value creation model to the context of Chinese HE recruitment market, our study aims to explore the roles of recruitment agencies in the international education sector, focusing on how they contribute to and facilitate engagement between UK HE institutions and international students.

Building on these gaps, the aim of this study is to explore the role of international recruitment agencies in facilitating value creation between UK higher education institutions and Chinese international students. Specifically, this study addresses the following research question: How do Chinese student recruitment agencies create value for both UK higher education institutions and prospective Chinese international students during the international student recruitment process? By focusing on recruitment agents' own perspectives, this study provides a more detailed understanding of how agencies operate not only as intermediaries but also as information exchangers, specialists and decision influencers within the international student recruitment process.

This study is important because it responds to the growing reliance of UK HE institutions on international recruitment agencies while also addressing the limited understanding of how agencies create value for both universities and students. The findings are intended to benefit several stakeholder groups. For HE institutions, the study offers insights into how recruitment agencies can be engaged more strategically to support communication, market positioning and student recruitment. For recruitment agencies, it clarifies their value-adding roles and highlights the importance of professional, transparent and student-centred practice. For prospective international students, particularly Chinese students, the study contributes to a better understanding of how agency support may influence access to information, application confidence and university choice.

Theoretically, the study extends the Grönroos-Voima value creation model by developing a framework that explains the triadic relationship among HE institutions, recruitment agencies and international students.

2. Literature review

2.1. The relationship between HE institutions and students prior to enrolment

Domestic UK students tend to visit university open days and discuss courses with tutors prior to applying for places before their college examinations. In contrast, international students, particularly Chinese students may have no interaction with UK HE institutions prior to application and enrolment. Chinese students rarely visit their prospective universities even in a domestic setting. It has been suggested that this may be due to high levels of cultural collectivism and strong social influence from parents and friends (James-MacEachern and Yun, 2017) and their trust in university ranking systems (Szekeres 2010). Due to the geographical distance, marketing tools such as brochures, social media and alumni networks applied by UK HE institutions are mostly not applicable to Chinese students. According to previous studies (MacEachern and Yun, 2015; Zhu and Reeves 2019), the influence of reference groups such as parents, friends, especially agents is significant on Chinese students when it comes to university selection. Many students who rely on recruitment agents do not show much understanding about the application and student visa process and additionally have only very limited information on HE institutions (Y. L. Zhang and Hagedorn 2011). Based on the extant literature, it seems the communication between HE institutions and students is very limited prior to the enrolment. However, we do not exclude that some students, whose parents or friends studied in abroad, may contact the institutions directly to discuss their provision.

2.2. The relationship between HE institutions and recruitment agencies

In the year 2021–22, more than two thirds of international students were from non-EU countries (Higher Education Statistics Agency [HESA], 2022). Among these international students, Chinese and Indian students are the largest groups (HESA, 2024). These two groups of students heavily rely on agencies to inform their choice of university (I. Y. Huang et al. 2022). Recruitment agencies serve as local representatives of HE institutions, acting as intermediaries providing promotion and guiding students through applications. The importance of agencies is especially evident among the small and medium sized universities who cannot draw upon high positioning in national and international University ranking lists (Yen, Yang, and Cappellini 2012). Many studies about the relationship between HE institutions and recruitment agents have applied agency theory considering HE institutions as principals (I. Y. Huang et al. 2022; Yen, Yang, and Cappellini 2012), however, agency theory often overlooks the significant role of recruitment agencies. In China, for example, recruitment agencies are deeply involved in shaping students' educational goals from a very young age, influencing their eventual university choices. This creates a unique and influential relationship between recruitment agencies and students. Hence, collaboration between UK HE institutions and recruitment agencies play a vital

role in fostering sustainable education, emphasising the integration of sustainability principles in educational design and the delivery of learning (Zhou and Alam 2024).

Nikula and Kivistö (2018) argue that HE institutions might not have enough understanding of the local market, resulting in a heavy reliance on local recruitment agencies. Recruitment agencies play an important role in the internationalisation of HE institutions through exchanging market knowledge, network facilitators, financial interest and reliance and trust factors (Sarkar and Perényi 2017). Robinson-Pant and Magyar (2018) found that universities collaborate with local recruitment agencies to monitor their operations, the role of agencies being not only bridging gaps between students and HEIs but also helping to shape the commercialised vision of HE institutions. Additionally, collaboration with local recruitment agencies can bring additional benefits such as competitive advantages in language and cultural understanding (Brabner and Galbraith 2013). Huang et al., (2022) argue that providers with lower market power may have fewer restrictions on agencies to monitor their actions, while Yang and Akhtaruzzaman (2017) cautioned that agents may provide misleading information. They argue that HE institutions should select agents carefully to find quality agents and liaise with the local agents closely.

2.3. The relationship between students and recruitment agencies

Pimpa (2003) explored the determinants affecting the overseas study choices of Thai students. Their study showed agencies have strong and heterogeneous influence on the choice of universities. The qualitative study indicated Thai students have limited information on the quality of study beforehand and hence they relied heavily on the information provided by agencies. Hagedorn and Zhang (2011) applied both qualitative and quantitative methods to identify the reasons why Chinese students use recruiting agencies. They found that more than two-thirds of students planned to use recruiting agencies to help with their application. This proportion was even higher for those students who had lower English proficiency and were unfamiliar with the application process. Beyond offering practical support, students report the perception that using an agency may increase the likelihood of getting to receive a study offer. Y. L. Zhang and Hagedorn (2011) and Rafi (2018) confirmed the important role of agencies for recruiting Chinese Students to American community colleagues. Another reason of using agencies is due to information asymmetry. According to Yang and Akhtaruzzaman (2017), recruitment agencies have local connections, resources, and local knowledge to guide students. Hence, they work as intermediaries linking HE providers and students, using their expertise to help HE providers with their purpose of commodification of tertiary education (Hulme et al. 2014). The importance of recruitment agencies in China has grown significantly since 2023, following the Chinese Ministry of Education's decision not to recognise online-only courses and its increased scrutiny of certain overseas universities (University World News 2023). This policy may lead students and parents to rely more heavily on agencies to verify the quality of universities.

Despite the positive role recruitment agencies play, literature also revealed some negative aspect of using agencies. A study conducted by Hagedorn and Zhang (2011) revealed that some agencies do not provide an accurate picture of universities or mislead students for their own financial benefits. Rafi (2018) further highlighted that some students report dissatisfaction with the received service from agencies, leading to

a corollary that agencies only provide essential information and experience rather than providing useful guidelines on studies and major choices. Xu and Miller (2021) find that although more than half of students used an agency to help with their application, their reflection on the process isn't positive. The absence of professionalism in the international recruitment market, the lack of language skills, unresponsiveness, higher agent fees, and even unethical practices are reported by students (Y. Zhang and Hagedorn 2014). Irrespective of whether students' experiences are more positive or negative, it is undeniable that the majority of Chinese students use recruitment agencies in the process of application. Therefore, understanding the role of agencies in the value-added model is crucial for UK HE institutions.

2.4. Theoretical framework: Grönroos-Voima value creation model

In management and marketing, the concept of value is widely researched, and it is considered a fundamental cornerstone of marketing in the service sector. Value is not perceived only in monetary terms but may include emotion perceptions, for example relating to trust, comfort, satisfaction and attraction (Grönroos 2012). Grönroos and Voima (2013) developed Grönroos-Voima Value Model analysing value creation from the service perspective on marketing and business from a micro-level point of view. It emphasises the collaborative and contextual nature of value creation between customers and service providers. The model illustrates three value spheres, namely, provider sphere, customer sphere, and joint sphere. Firms as providers, support their customers' everyday processes with offerings whose aim is to enable these customers to reach their goals in life or business in a way that creates value for them. The UK Higher Education (HE) market has increasingly become commodified, with students paying high tuition fees. As active consumers, students seek value for money (Taylor Bunce, Rathbone, and King 2023; Wilkinson and Wilkinson 2020). Universities, in turn, have assumed the role of service providers, competing within the HE market to develop effective, efficient, and equitable systems that attract students as customers (Naidoo and Jamieson 2005).

Applying the Grönroos-Voima value model to the international student recruitment process, HE institutions can be positioned within the provider sphere, while international students occupy the customer sphere. The joint sphere represents the interactions between HE institutions and international students, through which value may be co-created during the recruitment and decision-making process. Figure 1 illustrates this adapted application of the model and provides a conceptual basis for examining how value creation operates in the international student recruitment context. This adapted

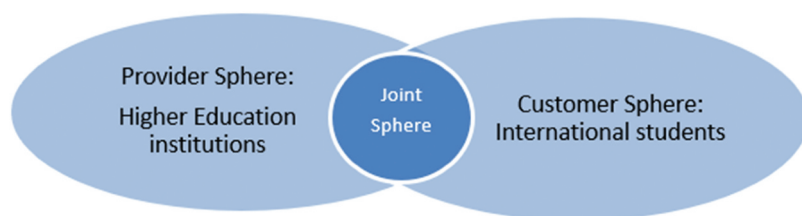


Figure 1. Adaption of Grönroos-Voima value model in international recruitment process.

model provides a useful starting point for understanding the relationship between HE institutions and international students. HE institutions facilitate value by offering programmes, institutional information and recruitment support, while students evaluate these offerings according to their educational goals, career expectations and personal circumstances. However, in the context of Chinese student recruitment to UK universities, the direct joint sphere between HE institutions and students may be relatively limited before enrolment, as students often rely on external sources of advice and support. This limitation suggests that the dyadic provider – customer structure of the original model does not fully capture the complexity of international student recruitment, particularly where recruitment agencies play a central mediating role.

Grönroos (2017) pointed out, however, that value creations do not occur in a linear fashion as depicted in Figure 1, instead, they can be iterative. The value process can start from any sphere. For example, international students could contact HE institutions for entry requirements; also, international HE institutions can have open days to advertise their services. Sometimes, the value creation process takes place long before any actual physical contact between HE institutions and students. This is typical in the case of the international student market for Chinese students. According to James-MacEachern and Yun (2017)'s study, in comparison with students from other countries, Chinese students rely on resources such as international recruitment agencies, peers, parents, and other internet resources to assist their study decisions (Bodycott 2009; James-MacEachern and Yun 2017). HE institutions may not have much direct contact with applicants before students enrol at the start of their courses. While the UK Higher Education (HE) market faces financial challenges, understanding the role of recruitment agencies could help HE institutions strategically leverage these partnerships to enhance their market competitiveness. Considering the Grönroos-Voima value model it is not clear where international recruitment agencies sit, nor how they interact with both providers and prospective students to create value.

Chinese students' interactions with HE institutions, during research and recruitment are often limited, which makes the joint sphere relatively small. International recruitment agencies could sit in customer sphere as an information resource; however, recruitment agencies are also customers of HE institutions, and the value provider of customer students. Hence, the Grönroos-Voima value model appears too simplified to explain this complex interrelationship between HE institutions, students, and recruitment agencies. The findings of our study in combination of the existing literature about roles of recruitment agencies will provide a theoretical framework for HE markets to recognise the role of international recruitment agencies in this value creation process. Before then, it is necessary to explain the Grönroos-Voima value model in the context of international student recruitment process and explore why both HE institutions and international students need recruitment agencies.

The recent studies show that recruitment agencies play important roles in providing information, supporting applications and facilitating international student mobility (Hagedorn and Zhang 2011; Pimpa 2003; Sarkar and Perényi 2017). However, those studies have primarily examined agencies from the perspective of students or HE institutions, with limited attention paid to the perspectives of recruitment agents themselves (Nikula and Kivistö 2018; Huang et al., 2020). In addition, prior research has often focused on dyadic relationships between

universities and students or between universities and agents, rather than fully explaining the triadic relationship among HE institutions, recruitment agencies and international students. Although the Grönroos-Voima value creation model offers a useful foundation for understanding provider – customer interaction (Grönroos 2017; Grönroos and Voima 2013), it does not clearly explain where recruitment agencies sit within the value creation process or how they create value for both universities and students. This study therefore addresses these gaps by exploring recruitment agents' perspectives and developing a conceptual framework that explains their roles within the international student recruitment process.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

This study adopts an inductive qualitative approach to explore the triadic relationship among Higher Education (HE) institutions, students, and recruitment agencies within the context of the Chinese market. By focusing on recruitment agents' perspectives, the research aims to identify their role in facilitating value creation during the recruitment process. The decision to employ qualitative methods stems from the limited existing research on the agency perspective, which necessitates an exploratory approach to uncover detailed insights into their functions and interactions.

3.2. Participants and sampling

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 27 employees from Chinese student recruitment agencies. This method was chosen for its flexibility in capturing detailed, context-specific experiences, allowing participants to express their views comprehensively. Interviews provided rich qualitative data, essential for understanding the complex dynamics and unique contributions of recruitment agents in bridging the gap between students and HE institutions. The qualitative approach is particularly suited to this study as it enables an examination of subjective experiences, interpersonal relationships, and the socio-cultural factors influencing the recruitment process. This method aligns with the study's aim of building a theoretical framework to understand the mediating role of recruitment agents in the value creation process.

The sample size was determined by reaching data saturation, as outlined by Saunders et al. (2018). Saturation occurred when additional interviews no longer yielded new themes or insights, confirming that the sample size was adequate to comprehensively address the research objectives. The decision to stop at 27 participants was also influenced by the diversity of perspectives already captured, which reflected variations in agency roles, locations, and recruitment practices within the Chinese market. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure they had substantial experience in Chinese student recruitment. This approach provided a diverse range of insights relevant to the study's objectives.

3.3. Data collection

While this study focuses on recruitment agents' perspectives, we acknowledge that interview data exclusively from agents may present potential subjectivity. To mitigate this, we designed interview questions to be neutral, encouraging participants to provide honest and reflective responses. This approach aimed to capture a well-rounded understanding of the agents' roles without leading or influencing their answers. Our sample included recruitment managers, study advisors and career consultants who shared their perspectives to help enhance our understanding of their roles for Chinese students and British universities. Firstly, participants were prompted to discuss their views on the importance and role of education agents. Secondly, discussions explored perceived contributions and value creation for both universities and students during the recruitment process. Interviews discussed the relationships between agents, students and universities including aspects of successful interaction as well as any perceived challenges to collaborative practice. Each interview was conducted either face to face and lasted between 40 and 60 min. Interviews were conducted in Mandarin, recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim. To preserve the meaning of participants' responses, the transcripts included relevant annotations relating to tone, hesitation and emphasis. The Mandarin transcripts were then translated into English, and two bilingual professionals were consulted to check the accuracy of translation and ensure that participants' intended meanings were retained. This process helped to enhance the credibility and depth of the qualitative interpretation.

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Interviews were all recorded and transcribed verbatim including annotation indicating tonality, hesitation, or humour to ensure that the true meaning could be captured. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research study, ethical considerations were addressed, and their full informed consent obtained. Following Ritchie, Spencer, and O'Connor (2003), participants were informed about the purpose of the study, assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and advised that their participation was voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any stage. Participants were also encouraged to express their views openly and honestly.

While semi-structured interviews were the primary data collection method, triangulation was ensured through several mechanisms to enhance the validity and reliability of the findings. First, cross-validation of interview translations was conducted by two bilingual professionals to ensure linguistic accuracy and preserve the authenticity of participants' responses. Second, the transcription process was thorough, including verbatim text and annotations for non-verbal cues such as tonality and hesitations, ensuring a deeper understanding of the data. Additionally, researcher reflexivity was incorporated to mitigate potential biases during data collection and analysis. This involved iterative discussions among the research team to cross-check emerging themes and interpretations. The consistency of findings with existing literature on recruitment agency roles also served as a form of theoretical triangulation, further supporting the robustness of the conclusions.

Table 1. Demographic profile of participants.

Participant	Gender	Age	Location	Agency	Occupation
P1	M	45–50	Chongqi	Agency A	Manager
P2	F	18–24	Chongqi	Agency A	Career Consultant
P3	F	30–34	Chongqi	Agency A	Career Consultant
P4	M	25–29	Beijing	Agency A	Assistant manager
P5	F	25–29	Beijing	Agency A	Advisor
P6	F	18–24	Beijing	Agency A	Advisor
P7	F	25–29	Beijing	Agency A	Recruitment manager
P8	F	30–34	Beijing	Agency A	Study advisor
P9	M	18–24	Guangzhou	Agency B	Consultant
P10	M	30–34	Guangzhou	Agency B	Manager
P11	F	18–24	Guangzhou	Agency B	Consultant
P12	M	25–29	Guangzhou	Agency B	Recruitment supervisor
P13	F	25–29	Chongqi	Agency C	Assistant Manager
P14	F	30–34	Chengdu	Agency D	Consultant
P15	M	35–40	Chengdu	Agency D	Manager
P16	M	45–50	Guiyang	Agency D	Manager
P17	F	30–34	Guiyang	Agency D	Consultant
P18	F	25–29	Wuhan	Agency E	Advisor
P19	F	35–40	Shanghai	Agency F	Assistant Manager
P20	F	35–40	Shanghai	Agency F	Assistant Manager
P21	F	25–29	Shanghai	Agency F	Advisor
P22	M	35–40	Chongqi	Agency C	Assistant Manager
P23	M	45–50	Chongqi	Agency C	Manager
P24	M	35–40	Wuhan	Agency E	Recruitment manager
P25	M	35–40	Shanghai	Agency A	Advisor
P26	F	18–24	Beijing	Agency F	Consultant
P27	F	18–24	Beijing	Agency E	Consultant

To facilitate anonymity, each participant was assigned a pseudonym from P1 to P27. Participants were recruited from six established student recruitment agencies operating in the Chinese international education market. These agencies varied in geographical coverage, professional focus and experience of advising Chinese students on applications to UK higher education institutions. To protect both participant and organisational anonymity, the names of recruitment agencies have been replaced with anonymised agency codes from Agency A to Agency F. These codes are used only to demonstrate that participants were drawn from multiple agencies and should not be interpreted as identifying the organisations involved. [Table 1](#) summarises the demographic and professional profile of the participants, including gender, age range, location, anonymised agency code and occupational role. The sample included 16 female and 11 male participants, with age groups ranging from 18–24 to 45–50 years. Participants were based in major Chinese cities, including Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Chongqing, Chengdu, Guiyang and Wuhan, and occupied a range of professional positions, including managers, assistant managers, recruitment managers, study advisors, consultants and career advisors. This diversity enabled the study to capture a broad range of perspectives on the role of recruitment agencies in international student recruitment.

3.4. Data analysis

The collected data was analysed using inductive thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a common method for analysing qualitative data, whereby themes and patterns in a transcribed interview are highlighted for further analysis (Terry et al., 2017). The six-

step approach recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006) was followed, namely (1) familiarising oneself with the data, (2) generating codes, (3) constructing themes, (4) reviewing potential themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. Table 2 presents the thematic analysis process by showing how the coded interview data were organised into subthemes and then grouped into three overarching themes: information exchangers, specialists and decision influencers. The table includes sample coded extracts to illustrate how participants' accounts informed the development of each theme. Rather than quantifying the frequency of responses, the purpose of Table 2 is to enhance analytical transparency by demonstrating the link between the raw interview data, the coding process and the final thematic structure. NVivo 12 was used a platform to support this process and to enable the data analysis to be collaborative between researchers and easily cross checked to ensure understanding and interpretation was commonly held. In addition, to ensure face validity, as suggested by Bryman and Bell (2008), a replicate of the analysed data was shared with the two interviewees to verify its credibility.

Table 2. Thematic analysis process.

Themes	Sub themes	Sample of coded text
Information Exchangers	Detailed Information Provider Managing application procedures, accommodation, and visa processes. Promoting Global Awareness Providing Feedback	"We provide students with a complete overview of university options, detailing course structures, career prospects, and campus facilities, helping them make informed decisions" "We regularly share insights from the market with universities, including trends in student preferences and feedback on course offerings, ensuring they can adapt their strategies effectively". "We ensure students have all the information they need to proceed smoothly". "We set up official accounts via Weibo or WeChat, push timely materials, and promote UK universities' recruitment efforts". "We serve as a mediator for feedback, relaying students' concerns about university curriculum design and admission requirements".
Specialists	Guidance on University Selection Application Process Expertise Market Knowledge and Strategy Custom Support Screening Candidates	"We carefully assess students' academic records and career aspirations to recommend universities that align with their goals". "We help students collect and organize information, prepare documentation, and tailor their applications to meet requirements". "Our expertise in the Chinese market allows us to recommend adjustments to university strategies to better attract Chinese students". "We help universities deal with specific student inquiries" "We screen initial applications and choose genuine candidates for universities".
Decision Influencers	Assurance and Trust Guidance in Life-Changing Decisions Market Influence Dependence for Recruitment	"Most of our applicants are single children. Parents need us to provide constructive suggestions to make the right decisions on universities and courses". "Sometimes students hesitate about studying abroad, and we help them see the long-term benefits, convincing them to pursue their dreams". "Our recommendations influence which programs universities prioritize for promotion in the Chinese market". "Lower-ranking universities are more dependent on us for recruitment ... we control that appropriately qualified students are enrolled".

As shown in Table 2, the analysis generated three central themes that capture the core roles performed by recruitment agencies in the international student recruitment process. The first theme, information exchangers, reflects the role of agencies in facilitating communication between students and universities. The second theme, specialists, captures their expertise in application procedures, market knowledge and tailored student support. The third theme, decision influencers, reflects their influence on students' and parents' decision-making as well as universities' recruitment strategies. These three themes provide the analytical structure for the findings and discussion section that follows.

4. Findings and discussion

Based on the interview discussion results, all participants strongly advocated the critical role of recruitment agents during the recruiting process. They emphasised that the interactions between HE institutions and students encouraged value creating process. Specifically, three main roles emerged from the data: information exchanger, specialists and decision influencer. Each of these roles are discussed below.

4.1. Information exchanger

There is a potentially confusing array of over 160 universities in the UK. Study in an unfamiliar country is a relatively new concept to Chinese students and students often have limited knowledge before they come to apply for their further studies overseas. Taken together, these factors highlight the need for support in guiding applicants through this unfamiliar and potentially confusing landscape. Participants explained that recruitment agencies provide students with a wide range of information to support university and programme choice, including institutional reputation, course content, future study pathways, career prospects, accommodation and visa-related guidance. Rather than simply passing information from universities to applicants, agents interpret and personalise this information according to students' academic backgrounds, aspirations and family expectations. Participant 25 explained:

'We provide professional opinions about UK universities and future employment career plans'.

This quotation illustrates that agents act as information interpreters rather than merely administrative intermediaries. They translate complex institutional information into practical guidance that students can use when comparing universities, programmes and future career opportunities. In this sense, recruitment agencies help reduce information asymmetry and support students in making more informed choices.

At the same time, agents also assist UK universities by improving their visibility in the Chinese market and communicating institutional offerings to prospective students. Fifteen participants commented that they received training and updated recruitment information from UK universities, enabling them to provide current advice to applicants while also supporting university recruitment activities. Participant 13 described this communicative role as follows:

'We support applicants through online questions and answers, Weibo or WeChat, and timely materials for UK university recruitment'.

This suggests that agents operate as local communication channels for UK universities. Their use of Chinese digital platforms, such as Weibo and WeChat, enables universities to reach prospective students through culturally familiar and linguistically accessible routes. Therefore, the information-exchange role is not limited to explaining university information; it also involves adapting recruitment communication to the Chinese market.

Participant 18 further highlighted the importance of agents in helping universities communicate with prospective students:

'Universities rely on us to promote themselves to students'.

This statement shows that universities may depend on agencies to make their offerings visible and understandable to Chinese students. In this way, recruitment agencies support value creation by helping universities communicate their programmes, expectations and institutional advantages more effectively. This finding is consistent with previous studies suggesting that agencies play a key role in information provision, application support and international student mobility (Pimpa 2003; Sarkar and Perényi 2017; Y. L. Zhang and Hagedorn 2011).

Due to significant language, cultural and informational differences, agents therefore serve as information exchangers between students and universities. This role commonly includes providing information about application procedures, programme choices, lifestyle, location and visa processes. Relatedly, Harris and Rhall (1993) note that agencies often provide a wide variety of services, including language study, counselling on college choice, career consultation and visa application support. Universities and colleges that have a physical or representative presence in target markets may also develop stronger connections with prospective students and provide more accessible recruitment resources (Nikula and Kivistö 2018).

Importantly, the findings show that agents exchange information not only with students but also with HE providers in the UK. Participant 11 described this bridging role during the admission process:

'We often act as liaisons during the admission process'.

This quotation demonstrates the dual-facing nature of agencies' work. Agents do not only advise students; they also help maintain communication between students and universities during the application and admission stages. This indicates that their contribution to value creation lies partly in ensuring that both parties have access to relevant, timely and understandable information.

Participant 20 further explained that agencies also communicate student feedback to universities:

'We serve as a conduit for feedback'.

This point is particularly important because it shows that information exchange is not one-directional. Agencies do not only transmit university information to students; they also carry student expectations, concerns and market feedback back to HE institutions. For students, recruitment agencies provide detailed and accessible information about universities, programmes, admission requirements and application processes. For universities, agencies convey market-specific insights and feedback from prospective students, enabling institutions to refine their programmes, communication strategies and recruitment approaches. By facilitating this two-way exchange, recruitment agencies strengthen communication, reduce information asymmetry and align expectations between HE institutions and prospective international students.

4.2. Specialists

Participants were keen to assert that recruitment agencies act as specialists in the recruitment process for both universities and students by offering tailored advice and expertise. They explained that their detailed knowledge of the Chinese education system and the Chinese student recruitment landscape enables them to understand the needs of students applying for undergraduate, postgraduate and doctoral studies in the UK. Several participants indicated that this knowledge helps to address gaps in UK HE institutions' understanding of the Chinese market. Participant 21 stated:

'Some university admissions staff do not know the Chinese market very well'.

This comment suggests that agents see themselves as local market experts who can interpret Chinese students' needs and expectations for UK universities. Their specialist role is therefore not limited to administrative support; it also involves translating local market knowledge into practical recruitment guidance for HE institutions. Participants also explained that they provide tailored advice to students by assessing their academic background, career aspirations and personal circumstances. Participant 15 explained:

"We carefully assess students' academic records and career aspirations.

This illustrates how agents position themselves as specialists who match students with appropriate universities and programmes. Their advice is based not only on general knowledge of UK higher education but also on an assessment of individual student profiles. In this way, agents contribute to value creation by helping students identify options that align with their academic goals, employability expectations and long-term plans.

In addition, participants suggested that even students with strong English proficiency may still be unfamiliar with the UK application process and therefore seek agency support. Students rely on agencies to understand application requirements, prepare documentation and tailor their personal profile to institutional expectations. Participant 8 explained:

'We analyse the information and compare different universities and courses'.

This indicates that agents' specialist knowledge involves more than collecting information. They actively evaluate programme options and relate them to students' backgrounds, helping applicants make more informed and strategic decisions. Similarly, Participant 9 highlighted the importance of remaining up to date with institutional changes:

'Part of our job is to stay updated on changes in university requirements and programmes'.

This expertise is particularly important in a changing recruitment environment where entry requirements, course structures and institutional priorities may differ across universities. Agents therefore help students navigate complexity while also ensuring that their recommendations remain accurate and relevant.

Participants also described their specialist role in relation to more complex applications, such as doctoral study. For example, Participant 19 explained that agents may help prospective doctoral applicants clarify their research direction and identify suitable supervisors before making an application. This suggests that agency support can extend beyond routine application processing and involve more personalised academic guidance. Such support is valuable because students may struggle to interpret programme information or identify appropriate academic contacts independently.

From the perspective of UK universities, participants suggested that agencies create value by helping institutions understand students' academic and financial backgrounds, screen potential applicants and adjust recruitment strategies for the Chinese market. Participant 16 described agencies as:

'front-line gatekeepers to control the quality of candidates'.

This quotation shows that agents view themselves as contributing to quality assurance in the recruitment process. By conducting initial checks and advising students on suitable options, agencies may reduce uncertainty for universities and improve the efficiency of application screening. Participant 20 further noted:

'Our expertise in the Chinese market allows us to recommend adjustments to university strategies'.

This demonstrates that agents' specialist knowledge is also strategic. They do not simply support individual applications; they also provide market intelligence that may help universities refine their recruitment messages, programme promotion and engagement with Chinese students. This role was further reinforced by Participant 5, who explained:

'We help them to screen initial applications and choose genuine candidates'.

This suggests that universities may benefit from agencies' local knowledge when identifying appropriate applicants. Recruitment agencies therefore act as specialists for both sides of the recruitment relationship: they support students by helping them understand institutional expectations, and they support universities by improving access to suitable applicants in the Chinese market.

These findings support Hagedorn and Zhang's (2011) research that agents provide language skills, application experience and reassurance during an uncertain process. The findings also align with previous studies showing that recruitment agencies offer local knowledge and connections (Yang and Akhtaruzzaman 2017) and use their expertise to help HE providers expand overseas recruitment (Hulme et al. 2014). Due to large cultural differences, students are often unfamiliar with the structure of UK programmes; agents therefore help students identify suitable programmes by drawing on their prior experience with study pathways, institutional requirements and student outcomes.

As professionals in education and the labour market, agents advise students on the strengths of different programmes while also advising international HE providers on the expectations of the Chinese student market. While Y. Zhang and Hagedorn (2014) highlight that students with lower English proficiency may rely on agencies to help with applications and negotiation, our findings suggest that even highly proficient English-speaking Chinese students may still seek agency support because of the complexity of programme comparison, application preparation and institutional decision-making. For HE providers, recruitment agencies may also help organise events or promote institutions as part of a wider marketing strategy. However, the quality of this service depends heavily on the specialisation and professionalism of agents. Previous research has suggested that some students have not received good-quality service from agents (Rafi 2018), possibly due to uneven expertise and high labour turnover in the industry. Therefore, to recommend schools and programmes effectively, recruitment agents need to be familiar with university strengths, programme features and relevant subject knowledge.

4.3. *Decision influencers*

Due to national policy in recent years, many families in China have only one child. Possibly influenced by this, students and their parents often seek assurance that they are making the right decision when choosing a UK university. If students apply independently, they may worry that they have limited or inaccurate information about universities, course selection, application procedures and visa requirements. Among the sample of 27 agents, eight had graduated from UK universities with master's degrees, while five had recently undertaken training or visited UK universities. Several agents therefore asserted that students and parents trusted their suggestions and relied heavily on their advice to support decision-making. Participant 1 explained:

'Parents are worried their child is going to travel thousands of miles away from home; thus they need us to provide constructive suggestions'.

This quotation illustrates the emotional and familial dimension of international student decision-making. Agents are not only providing technical application support; they are also offering reassurance to parents and students who perceive overseas study as a significant life decision. Their influence therefore operates through trust, perceived expertise and the ability to reduce uncertainty.

Participant 11 similarly described studying abroad as a major turning point for Chinese students:

'Studying abroad is a very big thing for Chinese students, and it is also a turning point in their lives'.

This suggests that agents become involved in decisions that are both educational and personal. They help students and parents navigate uncertainty by explaining the full process, including information collection, application forms, personal statements, visa applications and accommodation arrangements. In this sense, agents influence decisions by making the process appear more manageable and by providing structured guidance at each stage. Participant 21 further commented:

'Sometimes students hesitate about studying abroad, and we help them see the long-term benefits'.

This indicates that recruitment agencies may shape students' perceptions of the value of overseas education. By emphasising future career opportunities, personal development and long-term benefits, agents may influence whether students proceed with applications and how they prioritise institutional choices. This finding is consistent with previous research suggesting that agents can play a dominant role in shaping students' university choices (Bodycott 2009). Applying to university and living abroad independently can also be a source of stress for students and parents; agents may therefore act as trusted intermediaries who support communication between students and families and help build confidence in the decision-making process (Pimpa 2003; Sarkar and Perényi 2017).

From a university perspective, agents also act as decision influencers because they provide initial checks on students' application backgrounds, including academic performance, financial capacity and wider suitability. Participant 14 explained:

'Universities trust our quality control and the selection of candidates'.

This statement suggests that some universities place significant trust in agents' judgement when identifying suitable applicants. Agents therefore influence not only students' choices but also institutional decisions about recruitment priorities and candidate

suitability. Their role as ‘front-line’ actors in the recruitment process enables them to shape the flow of applications and support universities in meeting recruitment targets. Participant 13 also highlighted the importance of agents’ local knowledge:

Universities do not know these applicants well; they need to trust us to recruit students.

This illustrates the dependency that can emerge when universities have limited direct knowledge of applicants in overseas markets. Agents use their local understanding of students’ backgrounds, motivations and expectations to advise universities and support recruitment decisions. Their decision-influencing role is therefore embedded in the information asymmetry between UK universities and Chinese applicants.

The influence of agencies may be particularly significant for middle- and lower-ranking universities, which may rely more heavily on local agents to improve visibility and attract suitable applicants. As Participant 14 noted:

Middle- and lower-ranking universities are more dependent on us for student recruitment.

This suggests that agencies may have different levels of influence depending on an institution’s market position. Universities with stronger rankings or global reputations may have more direct visibility among international students, whereas less prominent institutions may rely more on agents to communicate their value proposition and attract applicants. In this respect, agencies contribute to the competitive positioning of universities in the Chinese student market.

Recruitment agencies also shape universities’ promotional strategies by advising institutions on which programmes to emphasise in their marketing activities. Participant 17 stated:

Our recommendations influence which programmes universities prioritise for promotion in the Chinese market.

This finding demonstrates that agencies influence decisions on both sides of the recruitment relationship. For students and parents, they shape perceptions of suitable universities, programmes and long-term benefits. For universities, they provide advice on programme promotion, market demand and recruitment strategy. This dual influence reinforces the role of recruitment agencies as active participants in the value creation process rather than passive intermediaries.

The findings reveal that recruitment agents believe universities trust their work and that closer collaboration can support more successful recruitment outcomes. This is consistent with Huang et al. (2022), who argue that agents act on behalf of HE institutions by encouraging student applications and supporting applicants through to enrolment. Moreover, the agents’ perspectives echo Yen, Yang, and Cappellini (2012) argument that universities tend to work with agents in a collaborative manner and seek to build closer *guanxi* with them to promote the HE institution to prospective students and enhance efficiency during the application process. In this study, agents’ decision-influencing role helps universities align their offerings with the expectations of prospective students, while also enhancing their competitive position in the Chinese market.

In summary, the findings answer the research question by showing that recruitment agencies understand and perform their role as active value creators within the international student recruitment process, rather than as passive intermediaries. Empirically, the

three themes demonstrate that agencies create value by exchanging information between students and universities, offering specialist knowledge of both the Chinese market and UK HE requirements, and influencing student and institutional decision-making. Theoretically, these findings extend the Grönroos-Voima value creation model by showing that the provider – customer relationship between HE institutions and international students is insufficient to explain international recruitment in the Chinese market. Instead, recruitment agencies occupy a central mediating position in the value creation process, operating across multiple joint spheres. They support students by reducing uncertainty, interpreting information and guiding university choice, while also supporting HE institutions by improving market access, communicating student expectations and shaping recruitment strategies. Therefore, the study shows that value creation in international student recruitment is triadic, involving HE institutions, recruitment agencies and international students.

5. Proposed research conceptual framework

In the Chinese student recruitment market, we argue that the international recruitment agencies play an important role in facilitating the match between Chinese students and Universities in the UK. The findings discussed here are summarised in a conceptual framework (as shown in Figure 2) demonstrating the value creation process among the

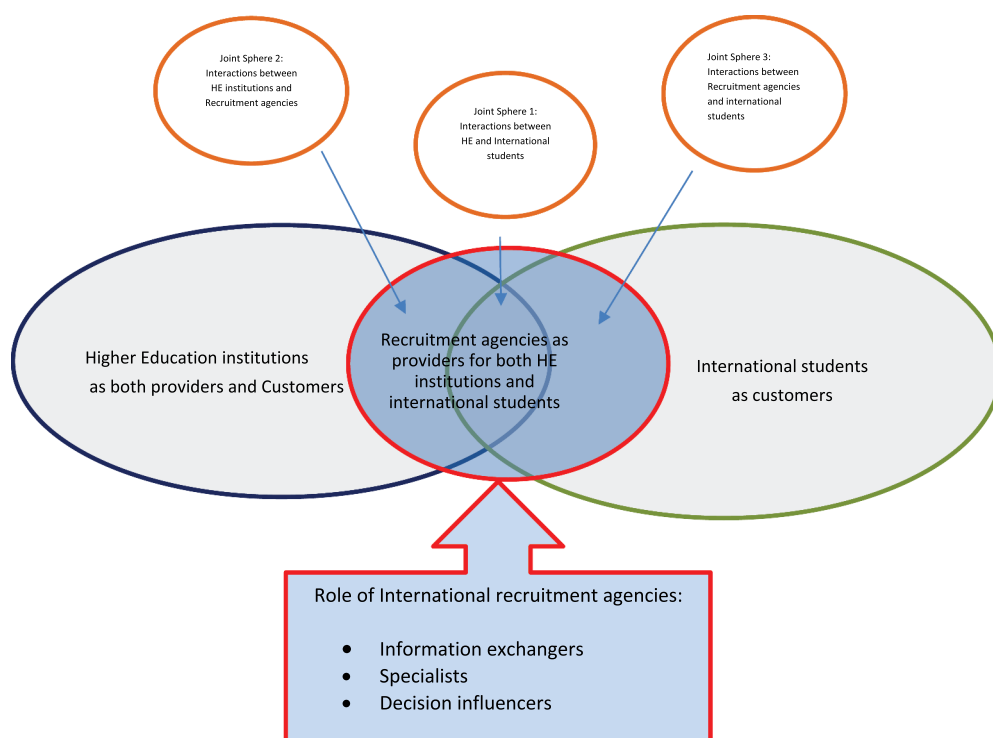


Figure 2. Conceptual framework –the fundamental role of international recruitment agencies in the value creation process.

relationships between HE institutions, international recruitment agencies and international students. The figure highlights international students acting as customers, Higher Education institutions are providers for international students and as customers for recruitment agencies. International recruitment agencies sit in the middle between HE institutions and international students, acting as providers for both HE institutions and international students.

In an increasingly marketised higher education landscape, universities now function as competitive service providers, aiming to meet students' expectations of 'value for money'. The commodification of education has shifted institutional priorities towards delivering efficient and effective services to attract and retain students as consumers. Recruitment agencies play a key role in this process by acting as intermediaries that align student expectations with institutional offerings, thereby facilitating student decision-making and enhancing universities' market positioning. For students, agencies provide tailored guidance to navigate an overwhelming array of choices, ensuring that their investment in education aligns with career aspirations and financial considerations. For universities, recruitment agencies help refine marketing strategies and improve programme visibility to appeal to student-consumers seeking the best return on investment. This dual role highlights the agencies' strategic importance in an HE sector driven by market forces, where institutions compete not only on academic excellence but also on service quality and perceived value. Three joint spheres were identified in this study: Joint sphere 1: the interactions between HE institutions and Chinese students, based on studies the value creation is very limited in this sphere, both parties need recruitment agencies during recruitment process. Joint sphere 2: value creation through the interactions between HE institutions and recruitment agencies. Joint sphere 3: value creation through the interactions between recruitment agencies and international students. The value creation in joint spheres 2 and 3 is greater than in joint sphere 1 which is solely created between HE institutions and students in the context of Chinese market. In addition, there are three fundamental roles of recruitment agencies which emerged from this study identifying the value created via interactive engagements with both UK universities and Chinese students, they are specialists, decision influencer and information exchanger. To enter local markets and access students, international HE institutions may need to rely on the expertise of agents as they are recruiting experts in local market have information on local students and education institutions. They have played an important role in connecting HE institutions programmes and students. By establishing trust and collaboration with students and providers, recruiting has been successful in sending students to university programmes and facilitate the school-to-work transition.

Each of the three themes, Information exchanger, specialists and decision influencers, captures a distinct role of recruitment agencies in the international student recruitment process. As information exchangers, agencies serve as intermediaries, facilitating a two-way flow of information. They ensure students have access to accurate, up-to-date details about universities, while also conveying feedback from prospective students to institutions. This role uniquely bridges cultural and informational gaps, aligning expectations on both sides. As specialists, recruitment agencies function as experts by leveraging their in-depth knowledge of university offerings and admission processes. This role is characterised by tailored advice to students, ensuring their academic goals align with suitable

institutions. For universities, agencies provide market insights that refine programme development and outreach strategies. As decision Influencers, agencies actively shape student decisions by offering guidance rooted in trust and credibility. This influence is evident in helping students prioritise options or overcome uncertainties about studying abroad. For universities, this role extends to advising on how to position programmes effectively to appeal to target demographics.

6. Academic contributions and managerial implications

This research contributes to the literature in two aspects. First, based on a service logic framework used widely in marketing research, this study adapts and extends the Grönroos-Voima Value Model to apply the role of agents in international student recruitment. A theoretical framework was developed revealing the value creation in the service industry among relationships between HE institutions, international recruitment agencies and international students. Although value may be created from direct interactions between international students and HE institutions (Joint sphere 1), it is found that this direct interaction holds only limited potential in the context of Chinese market. Thus, there is an essential need for both HE institutions and international students to engage with international recruitment agencies. Joint activities involving direct interaction between HEIs and recruitment agencies (joint sphere 2) and between international students and recruitment agencies (joint sphere 3) contribute to total experienced value creation in the process of HE recruitment. Secondly, based on in-depth interviews with recruiting agents, we explain in this paper how education agents can help universities shape programmes to facilitate the education-to-work transition for international students. This is done mainly to identify the role of intermediaries and the key themes, which affect the reliance of the intermediaries in the process of internationalisation. The research findings revealed views on the importance of recruiting international students in the context of imperfect information and cultural differences and identified that recruitment agents play three roles in the value creation during recruitment of international students: specialists, decision influencer, and information exchanger. Based on the conceptual framework and the interviews with education agents, we believe that education agents create greater value, not limited to the following, information exchange to students through interactions and information exchange with universities.

We argue that international recruitment agencies play a profound role in recruiting international students for HE institutions, but also in influencing international students' decision making and even in progressing the marketisation of overseas programmes. Agents communicate with international students directly in local languages, explaining the relative merits of choosing between programmes and institutions, universities are highly dependent on recruitment agencies for student recruitment in China. These agents act not only as intermediaries providing information but also as mentors by building trusted relationships for both universities and students. Understanding the importance of recruitment agencies helps HE institutions understand how to work collaboratively with agents, particularly universities that cannot rely on strong league table performance, to boost the number of applications, select qualified students, and provide better support and services for student on their behalf. Equally, international recruitment agencies

should make use of its direct interactions with HE institutions and students to develop and maximise the value fulfilment.

The Grönroos-Voima Value Model considers firms, consumers, and the dyadic interactions between these two actors in the creation of value. In this paper it is argued that this dyadic depiction is, in the case of international student recruitment, often too simplistic. A third group of actors, serving as intermediaries provide a critical interface, mediating between the needs of the firm and the needs of the consumer. While the mediating role of the recruitment agent has been well explored in this research, we posit that it is likely that in other settings additional spheres of influences are also key to value creation. In today's online world we might, for example, consider online interactions as often being critical, supporting our research prior to, or during in person interactions with a firm. As such we suggest that our reconceptualised research framework is considered and evaluated in other contexts.

7. Research limitations and future studies

The results from this study represent education agents' perspectives filling an identified research gap in existing literature. Despite efforts to design neutral questions and encourage candid responses, this focus limits the scope to their perspectives, potentially overlooking insights from other key stakeholders, such as students and higher education institutions. Perspectives from these groups are critical for a more comprehensive understanding of the recruitment process. Future studies could extend our findings by incorporating viewpoints from students and sector representatives to triangulate the constructs identified in this paper. This would allow for a more comprehensive exploration of the triadic relationship among agents, students, and HE institutions, and further validate the conclusions drawn. Further, while the use of inductive depth interviewing was warranted by the lack of existing knowledge, it would be beneficial if future studies extended our work through quantitative approaches to assess how widely our findings can be generalised within the market.

This study is focused on one market, Chinese students and Chinese recruitment agencies. While it is likely that some of the key findings are applicable beyond the Chinese context, it is also likely that different markets will have their own nuances, thus, the empirical work could be replicated via other country's international recruitment agencies and students with comparisons made with the present findings. This would also be especially interesting for future research in service industry to explore whether there are any differences between Asian market from other European Countries where the HE institutions' recruitment process rarely engages external recruitment agencies. Lastly, the value creation facilitated by recruiting agencies is subject to the effective collaboration between HE institutions and agents. However, the incentives between the two parties might not necessarily be the same. The impact of the communication and the collaboration is beyond the scope of this study and should be investigated in future research.

8. Conclusion

This study has critically explored the role of recruitment agencies in international student mobility, particularly within the Chinese market and their collaboration with UK higher education institutions. Through thematic analysis of interviews with recruitment agents, three distinct roles were identified: specialists, information exchangers and decision influencers. As specialists, recruitment agencies provide tailored guidance to students, ensuring alignment with suitable universities, while also assisting institutions by offering insights into market trends and student expectations. As information exchangers, agencies bridge communication gaps, providing students with accurate details on applications and admissions while relaying feedback to universities to refine their offerings. In their role as decision influencers, agencies alleviate uncertainty for students and parents, helping them make informed choices, while universities benefit from their ability to promote programmes effectively and shape recruitment strategies. The findings of this study contribute to the broader understanding of recruitment agencies' value creation, extending the theoretical framework of the Value Creation Model. The research highlights how these agencies not only facilitate student mobility but also play a crucial role in shaping universities' international recruitment efforts. While the study offers valuable insights, it is limited by its focus on recruitment agents' perspectives. Future research should incorporate views from students and HE institutions to provide a more comprehensive understanding of this triadic relationship. Additionally, exploring recruitment agency roles in other geographical contexts could further validate and expand upon these findings. Ultimately, this research reveals the pivotal role of recruitment agencies in international higher education, emphasising the need for universities to engage strategically with agents to enhance recruitment outcomes while ensuring transparency and ethical practices.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Data available on request from the authors

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, [Yan (Danni) Liang], upon reasonable request.

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