THE INFLUENCE OF EDUCATION AGENTS ON STUDENT CHOICE MAKING IN THE CANADIAN POSTSECONDARY SEARCH PROCESS

By

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ABSTRACT

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Globalization has had an ongoing and significant impact on postsecondary education, with international student migration as one of the most visible markers. Education agents have emerged as middlemen in international student recruitment industry, mediating the admissions process on behalf of their institutional and student clients. The commission-based model within which most agents operate has prompted concern about whether agent profit and not student welfare drives decision-making in the search process. While agents have become ubiquitous in international admissions, little is known about their impact of their involvement on the outcome for their student clients.

The purpose of this study was to learn more about the role of student choice in the agent-mediated Canadian postsecondary search process. The setting of this study was eight postsecondary institutions in one Canadian province. A qualitative research methodology was used, and 23 currently enrolled international students were interviewed over the course of five months. The central research question was: What is the experience of international students involved in an agent-assisted Canadian postsecondary search process?

Study findings identified several push and pull factors (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002) and key reference groups that catalyzed student interest in education abroad and influenced initial goal construction. Respondents readily identified both affordances and limitations that they associated with hiring an agent. Students typically hired agents to compensate for the time,

knowledge, connections, and expertise they and their reference groups lacked. Commission-based agents primarily influence student choice-making by offering a severely constrained set of institutional and program choices. Migration-minded students were frequently willing to subordinate concerns about institutional fit, as any earned postsecondary qualification provides a glide path to permanent residency. Respondents frequently employed creative strategies to gather additional information that could be used to verify or expand upon what their agents told them. Nearly all respondents indicated satisfaction with the search outcome, although this was correlated with the degree of institutional or program undermatching or mismatching they had experienced.

The results of this study have implications for students, postsecondary institutions, and policymakers, which are presented. Limitations of this research include the setting (several postsecondary institutions in one Canadian province), the number of respondents (23), the qualitative approach, and the underrepresentation of undergraduate students in the study sample. Directions for future research include inquiry into the experiences of students who did not use agents; students who used agents but did not persist to graduation; and the experience of students who used agents to apply to Francophone postsecondary institutions in Canada.

This work is dedicated to the memory of Robert N. Coffey, Sr., whose name I proudly bear,
and to Jacquelyn Coffey, with heartfelt thanks for their love, guidance, and support.
Their resilience and strength inspired my determination to complete this work.
I also dedicate this to my partner, Steven Chang. Thank you for sharing this journey with me.

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Chapter One: Framing The Study

Introduction

In this study I sought to understand international students' experiences of agent-assisted Canadian postsecondary placement and the role of student choice in this process. In order to accomplish this goal, I worked to understand: (a) how international students use agents ("agents"); (b) students' experience of the process by which agents help them identify and apply to a range of suitable Canadian postsecondary institutions; (c) students' perceptions of agent responsiveness to their academic, personal, and vocational interests; and (d) the correlation between agent responsiveness and student satisfaction with the institution to which they have matriculated.

Conceptually, this study was driven by the assumption that key elements of the search process for international students – including the role agents, parents, and students play, criteria used in ascertaining institutional fit, what and whose objectives drive the search, how decisions are made, who makes them, the information that influences them, and the weight accorded the student's own preferences – differs markedly from how it is commonly understood in the North American context (Bodycott, 2009; Bodycott & Lai, 2012; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Both U.S. professional standards (NACAC, 2010; NAFSA, 2009) and scholarly literature (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Chapman, 1981; Hossler and Gallagher, 1987; Hurtado, Inkalas, Briggs & Rhee, 1997; Norris, 2005; Tierney, 1983) centralize student agency in the search process and voice a concern for student welfare. "College access," Berger (2011) has asserted, "depends on the assurance that students are provided accurate information about postsecondary institutions, treated fairly…and given the quality education and professional opportunities that they are promised". NAFSA's *Statement of Ethical Principles* (2009) commits members to transparency

in their dealings and to provide students with "the information they need to make good decisions" (p. 2).

There is evidence that these ethical guidelines and theoretical models may not account for the experiences of international students in the postsecondary search process, and specifically for the impact of agent involvement. The agency dilemma (Shapiro, 2005) suggests that the information asymmetries that prompt a "principal" (client) to hire an agent also impact agent selection and performance monitoring. "[P]rincipals don't know the true 'type'...of the varied candidates in the pool of potential agents," Shapiro observes, "[and] they…don't know what [agents] are doing once they select [one]" (p. 264). In the context of the postsecondary search, this means students may lack the information needed to select an agent, evaluate the agent's recommendations, or detect whether the agent is acting contrary to their interests. Much of the criticism of agent use is a response to the opaque environment within which the agent-student transaction takes place. As one agent observed, "With a foreign student, [recruitment is] a blind date – it's an arranged marriage" (Fiske, 1981, p. 46).

Relationship to Existing Literature

My study builds upon current literature on globalization (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Altbach & Teichler, 2001; Bartell, 2003; Beck, 2009; Burnett & Huisman, 2009; Chan & Dimmock, 2008; Currie, DeAngelis, de Boer, de Wit & Knight; 1999; Knight, 2007; Huisman & Lacotte, 2003; Jang, 2009; Knight, 1997a; 1997b; 2001; 2003; 2004; 2007; 2012; Knight & de Wit, 1999; Marginson, 2009; Marginson & van der Wende, 2007; Steiner-Khamsi, 2004; R. Tsing, 2005; Yang, 2002; 2003); international student recruitment (Choudaha & Chang, 2012; Davis, 2009; Kallur, 2009; Knight & de Wit, 1995; Marginson, 2007; 2009; Room, 2000; Verbik & Lasanowski, 2007; UNESCO, 2012; Wang, 2009); student migration (Altbach, 2009; Baas,

2006; Chen & Zimitat, 2006; Bodycott, 2009; Bodycott & Lai, 2012; Choudaha, Orosz & Chang, 2012; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Pimpa, 2001; 2003; 2005; 2008; UNESCO, 2012); student choice (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Chapman, 1981; Cubillo, Sánchez & Cerviño, 2006; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Hurtado, Inkalas, Briggs & Rhee, 1997; Salisbury, Paulsen & Pascarella, 2010; and Canadian postsecondary education (Fisher et al., 2005; Gribble, 2008; Jones, 2009; Rizvi, 2011; Shubert, Jones & Trilokekar, 2009).

Globalization has had a significant impact on postsecondary education and its various stakeholders and the global flow of students from sending to receiving countries is perhaps one of the most visible signs of this impact. Much has been written about the factors shaping student destination choice (Chen, 2007; Lawley & Perry, 1998; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002), the role of parents, teachers, and peers as influencers (Bodycott & Lai, 2012; Pimpa, 2001; 2003; 2008; Wang, 2007); the different marketing strategies institutions employ (including the use of agents) (Chen, 2007; Hagedorn & Li, 2011; O'Connell & Wong, 2010; Wang, 2009); international student expectations of their host institutions (Ahmad, 2006); their experiences after arrival (how recruitment contributes to broader institutional internationalization goals (Knight, 2004); and the impact of student migration on the sending country (Gribble, 2008). Lee (2008) has described a gap in the *student migration* literature and student choice (Lee uses the term *college access)* theories as developed in the U.S. "Considerably more research and new theoretical frameworks are needed to understand college access on the global scale" (p. 4).

Current literature focusing specifically on agents is in the earliest stages of development. Very little has focused on agent use by North American postsecondary institutions, as they were late adopters of the agent recruitment model. In contrast, Australian institutions have used agents for decades (Adams, Levanthal & Connelly, 2012; Wang, 2009) as part of an unabashedly

entrepreneurial approach to marketing its postsecondary education sector. Agents have played a major role in the staggering growth in international enrollment in Australia, which leapt from 25,000 in 1990 to over 250,000 by 2007 (Marginson, 2011b). Australia's overall approach, its embrace of agents, and its policy response to concerns about agent misbehavior have all been widely discussed (and critiqued) in scholarly literature, education media, and policy papers (Altbach, 2011; Marginson, 2011a; 2001b; Moodie, 2011; Parr, 2014). While there are limits to the applicability of the Australian experience to Canada, both countries are competitors in a global market for students (EduWorld, 2012) and it is likely that their institutions have used some of the same agencies and agents.

The literature on student choice includes frequently cited models (Chapman, 1981; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Scholars have considered how social identities like race, gender, and socioeconomic status (SES) and personal attributes like parental involvement and academic performance influence student choice. Much of this research has originated in the U.S. While this has begun to change (Bodycott & Lai, 2012; Cubillo, Sánchez & Cerviño, 2006; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Pimpa, 2001), little has been written about student choice in the Canadian context (Drewes & Michael, 2006). While this may limit the utility of U.S.-generated models as a means of understanding international students' experience of a postsecondary search (Lee, 2008) it may serve as a point of departure for considering the salience of culture, nationality, gender, and socioeconomic status as factors influencing students in a non-U.S. environment. More specifically, could cultural orientation help explain students' (and parents') preference for using agents in the postsecondary search process?

Canada provided an interesting context for this study, as its history and experience of campus internationalization differs from that of the U.S., U.K., and Australia. Education is the

responsibility of the provinces under Canadian law (Shubert, Jones & Trilokekar, 2009). While this has historically limited federal involvement in postsecondary education, a shared interest in attracting international students (Anderssen, 2012) has led to an uneasy partnership between Ottawa and the provinces (Baluja, 2012; Jones, 2009). Joint development of a brand identity campaign promoting Canada as an education destination is perhaps the most tangible outcome of this partnership (Tamburri, 2008; Zilio, 2012). Both levels of government have pursued policy strategies intended to attract international students to Canada and encourage them to settle permanently after graduation (Anderssen, 2012; Wang, 2009). Policies allowing international students to work off campus while pursuing a postsecondary credential and to work for a number of years following degree completion seem intended to provide Canada a competitive edge vis-à-vis popular destinations with more restrictive policies like the U.S. and U.K. (Verbik & Lasanowski, 2007; Wang, 2009). While many in Canada have embraced this more aggressive approach, others worry that the rush to increase international enrollment will lead to abuse of the student visa pathway by applicants more interested in migrating than earning a credential (Carletti & Davison, 2012). I hoped this study could help illuminate the consequences (intended and otherwise) of Canada's current policy strategies promoting international recruitment. How does this approach shape students', their parents', and agents' perceptions and expectations of Canada as a potential education destination? How do they respond?

This topic can be situated within a broader discussion about globalization, student migration, and the affordances and limitations of participation for all of the stakeholders involved in the transaction (students and their families, agents, institutions, governments). Having provided an overview of the topic of this study and the ways in which this work is situated within a broader scholarly literature, I will now provide some background for the study.

Rationale for the Study

The impact of globalization on postsecondary education. Yang (2000; as cited in 2002) has described *globalization* as "an economic process of integration that transcends national borders and ultimately affects the flow of knowledge, people, values, and ideas" (p. 81). While proponents describe it as a force for democratization and economic liberalization (Rosenberg, 2002), others have problematized globalization as a neoliberal project that sublimates governments and societies to the interests of a transnational corporate elite (Currie, DeAngelis, de Boer, Huisman & Lacotte, 2003; Tsing, 2005). Often cast as an imperative requiring an adaptive and competitive response, globalization has had a profound influence on most institutions, including postsecondary education.

Scholars have identified a variety of costs and benefits associated with the globalization of postsecondary education (Knight, 2007). Altbach and Knight (2007) have noted that unprecedented and massive investments in "knowledge industries" by global capital have accompanied the "emergence of the 'knowledge society'…and the dependence of many societies on knowledge products and highly educated personnel for economic growth" (p. 290). While this positions postsecondary education as a significant resource for globalizing economies, it also frames education as something to buy or sell rather than a common good (p. 291). "Commercial forces therefore have a legitimate or even a dominant place in higher education, which comes under the domain of the market" (p. 291). This has often led to decreases in public funding as well as pressure to monetize research activities (Burnett & Huisman, 2009; Shubert, Jones & Trilokekar, 2009) and identify new sources of revenue (Lee & Kim, 2010). Additionally, Marginson (2009) and others (Altbach, 2004; Altbach & Knight, 2007; Currie, DeAngelis, de Boer, Huisman & Lacotte, 2003; Yang, 2003) have noted the propensity for globalization to

further concentrate wealth and power in Western developed nations. Furthermore, Marginson (2009) has noted that "the benefits of globalization [have been] distributed asymmetrically, disadvantaging not just the developing nations…but also the non-English-speaking developed nations…[M]ore than two-thirds of the top one hundred research universities are in English-speaking nations" (p. 28).

This effect of globalization helps explain the ongoing demand among students in sending countries for an overseas postsecondary credential. (Burnett & Huisman, 2009). An array of push-and-pull factors (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002) leads international students to seek education abroad (Cubillo, Sánchez & Cerviño, 2006; Pimpa, 2001; M. Yang, 2007; R. Yang, 2002; Wang, 2007). Most notable include limited postsecondary opportunities in the sending country (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002), the desire to acquire a competitive edge in local labor markets (Rizvi, 2001), and the possibility of permanent migration to the receiving country (Bodycott, 2009; Rizvi, 2011; Wang, 2009).

Altbach (2002) has suggested that the most tangible evidence of the impact of globalization has been "the emergence of a worldwide market for academic talent, stimulated in part by the large numbers of students who study abroad" (p. 7). I argue that students, their parents, postsecondary institutions, the agents acting as brokers, and even the governments of both sending and receiving countries are all responding to the (perceived or actual) pressures of globalization in encouraging, initiating, facilitating, and/or permitting this transaction. The growing ubiquity of *education agents* is a direct consequence of the emergence of this globalized market for postsecondary education. Through this study I hoped to gain a better understanding of this phenomenon, and specifically, the experiences of students who used an agent to assist with their Canadian postsecondary search.

Agent use in international recruitment. For many international students, ascertaining institutional fit and navigating complex application and visa processes can be quite difficult (Pimpa, 2001) and seem high risk (Loudon & Bitta, 1988; as cited in Pimpa, 2001). A preference for using a middleman (Bodycott, 2009; Bodycott & Lai, 2012; Whitcomb, Erdener & Li, 1998) to provide personalized and culturally relevant assistance leads many students and their families to hire an agent. NACAC (2010) has defined an *education agent* as "an individual, company, or organization that provides advice, support, and placement services" (p. 1). Agents are paid for their services – by the educational institutions they represent, the students they assist, or both. When working with students, agents can help identify a range of suitable institutions, help explain admissions processes, translate documents, help students practice their interview skills, review their essays and writing samples, and expedite the paperwork needed for visa applications (Levanthal, 2011).

Agents play a significant role as 'matchmakers': recruiting students to an institution that they assert will meet their clients' expectations (Adams, Levanthal & Connolly, 2012). For postsecondary institutions – especially "second tier" ones with low name recognition overseas (Marginson, 2009) – agents can help raise their profile in overseas markets where reputation and ranking in global "league tables" carry significant weight (Marginson & van der Wende, 2007).

While agent use has become settled practice in Australia and the U.K., their involvement in the admissions process has become controversial in North America (Charbonneau, 2010; Fischer, 2011, 2012; Lewin, 2008; 2012). Proponents insist that agent involvement benefits institutions (increasing campus diversity), governments (recruiting and educating prospective skilled migrants), and students (mediating a complex process) (NACAC, 2010; 2011). Critics argue that agents satisfy less palatable objectives (e.g., an unsanctioned pathway to migration for

students and families; revenue generation for institutions) at the expense of the recruitment process's (and institution's) integrity (Altbach, 2011; Hagedorn & Zhang, 2011).

Current institutional practice with regard to agent use differs significantly. While some institutions screen agents and sign written contracts with them, others have considerably more informal arrangements. A weak regulatory environment exists in countries where agents are most active and efforts from within the profession to self-regulate have been sporadic. There is as yet no universally recognized qualification for education agents. This has created a grey market in which professional norms have not been established, making it difficult for students and institutions to verify that agents are acting ethically (Reisberg & Altbach, 2011). The global dimensions of the issue coupled with the competitive recruitment environment have prompted calls for a coordinated strategy among destination countries. In late April of 2012, education officials in Australia, Britain, Ireland, and New Zealand announced the creation of a joint code of ethics (the "London Statement") intended for use by agents representing education institutions in their countries (Jaschik, 2012). While they participated in the discussions that led to the development of this code, the U.S. and Canada are not yet signatories (Baker, 2012), although Canada has introduced an online training program for agents interested in representing Canadian institutions (Custer, 2012).

Even as agent use is ubiquitous, under-regulated (at best), and controversial, little is known about the nature of agents' work with students. As the opposition within North America to agent use appears to rest partially on professional norms associated with supporting and guiding students and their families through the admissions process, the focus of this dissertation rests specifically on students' experience with agents. Given the concern about paid-commission agents marginalizing their clients' needs and interests in favor of maximizing personal profit

(Altbach, 2011), I am specifically interested in exploring the degree to which student choice influences agent target institution selection.

Canadian postsecondary education as a context. Shifting policy priorities and jurisdictional friction between the federal and provincial governments continue to shape Canada's approach to international recruitment (Shanahan & Jones, 2007). In contrast to Australia's aggressive entrepreneurism, McHale (2006) has described Canada as a "reluctant recruiter" (p. 23). A postwar focus on assuring postsecondary access for domestic students delayed institutional interest in recruitment activities abroad (Jones, 2009). Concerns about labor shortages (Becker & Kolster, 2012) and rural depopulation coupled with an interest in skilled migrants as vectors of economic development have stimulated Canada's latent interest in attracting a greater share of the global student market. Canada's decentralized postsecondary system and territorialism between the different levels of government delayed the development of a coordinated approach to marketing Canada as an education destination (Jones, 2008; EduWorld, 2012).

Efforts to make Canada more internationally competitive by allowing international students to work off-campus and easing access to work permits after graduation (Siddiq, Baroni, Lye & Nethercote, 2010) have been tempered by policymaker concerns that the student visa process has become vulnerable to misuse by agents colluding with would-be economic migrants. While the debate over agents is not as vitriolic in Canada as it has frequently become in the U.S., incidents of agent misbehavior in the recruitment of skilled migrant workers to Canada have intensified scrutiny of agent use in postsecondary recruitment. Repeated abuses by agents in the recruitment of skilled workers to Manitoba prompted passage in 2008 of the *Worker Recruitment and Protection Act (WRAPA),* which requires agencies to be licensed and prevents agents from

charging their clients (Allan, 2009). It is unclear to what degree concerns about agent involvement in Canadian postsecondary recruitment are merited. Little is known about the use of agents by Canadian postsecondary institutions, including how widespread the practice is, whether institutions exercise oversight, offer training, or insist on transparency in agent fees. Canadian postsecondary institutions do not routinely survey matriculated international students to assess their experience of the admissions process or of the agents that assisted them.

Theoretical Perspectives Informing This Research

The premise of this dissertation rests on the notion that many factors may influence prospective students' choice of postsecondary institution (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Chapman, 1981; Vrontis, Thrassou & Melanthiou, 2006), including parental involvement (Flint, 1992); socioeconomic status (Tierney, 1980); gender (Stage & Hossler, 1989); race and ethnicity (Ceja, 2006; Freeman, 1999; Freeman & Thomas, 2002; Hurtado, Inkelas, Briggs & Rhee, 1997; Pitre, 2006). Chapman's (1981) Model of Student Choice identified three primary external influences on student choice: *significant persons* (e.g., parents, peers, school counselors), *fixed college characteristics* [e.g., geographic location, availability of desired course of study) and *college efforts to communicate with students* (e.g., print materials, admissions tours). Chapman's model was helpful for me as I worked to understand how students' academic, vocational, and personal interests and preferences develop and how they shape the search process.

Hossler and Gallagher (1987) have suggested that students move through three-stage process of discernment with regard to college choice. In the first stage – *predisposition* – students first begin to cultivate aspirations for postsecondary study. They begin gathering information and identifying institutional and disciplinary characteristics that could be used in

determining fit during the second, or *search* stage. In the final, or *choice* stage, students have acquired enough information to enable them to both identify target institutions while ruling out those they believe to be unfit. I used Hossler's and Gallagher's model to help construct an interview protocol that aligned chronologically with students' progression.

It is important to remember that most of the scholarly literature on student choice has been situated in the U.S. context and used a U.S. sample (Joseph & Joseph, 2000). As I have mentioned elsewhere, research focusing on student choice for non-U.S. populations is still emerging (Bodycott, 2009; Cubillo, Sanchez & Cervino, 2006; Pimpa, 2001). Even so, this new literature suggests that cultural norms and expectations not accounted for in U.S. models may significantly shape choice making by students and their families (Bodycott & Lai, 2009). This means that I recognize the limitations of U.S.-based theoretical perspectives even as I utilize these perspectives as a guide to the processes.

Definition of Terms

Student. In this study, I use "student" to refer to an individual who (1) is seeking admission to a postsecondary institution; or (2) has been accepted to a postsecondary institution but not yet matriculated; or (3) has matriculated and is currently enrolled at a postsecondary institution. I use the term "international student" to refer to an individual involved in an *international* postsecondary search and who may be at any of the three stages mentioned in the previous definition. While international students sometimes seek secondary education opportunities overseas, these students and their experiences are outside the bounds of this study.

Postsecondary education. Statistics Canada defines postsecondary education as including "formal educational activities for which high school completion is the normal

education requirement" (Orton, 2009, p. 11). Further, "postsecondary education providers" "develop and deliver formal educational activities and award academic credentials to people for whom the normal entrance requirement is high school completion" (p. 11). Statistics Canada also identifies specific criteria that an institution must meet in order to be considered a postsecondary provider (p. 12). In this dissertation I will use "postsecondary educational institution" or '"PSEI" to refer to a college or university providing postsecondary education with degree programs leading to the awarding of a degree upon successful completion of study (p. 11). I will use "postsecondary education" or "education" to refer more broadly to the entire sector. While in the U.S. context, the term "college" is frequently used to refer generally to the higher education sector, it should be noted that in Canada colleges refer exclusively to institutions offering applied and vocational instruction leading to a diploma or certificate, as opposed to research-oriented universities that grant degrees. As such, I refrain from using "college" or "university" interchangeably in this study, while acknowledging that much of the (U.S.-generated) scholarly literature I reference does.

Education agent. Krasocki (2002) defines an education agent as "an individual, company or other organization providing services on a commercial basis to help students and their parents gain places on study programmes overseas" (p. 2). She identifies and describes a taxonomy of agents, ranging from agents who represent specific institutions, to agents who hare no institutional affiliation, to non-education specialists who may advise students as a side line (p. 2) For the purposes of this dissertation, I use 'agent' to refer to an individual who offers postsecondary education advising services to students and families in exchange for a fee (paid by students and their families) and/or commission (paid by a postsecondary institution they represent).

Enrollment status. Citizenship and Immigration Canada (2012) defines a full-time student as "a person whose program of study is normally at least 15 hours of instructions per week, leading to a degree, diploma or certificate, unless otherwise defined by the educational institution". In this study, I rely on the same definition.

Student choice. I use this term to refer to student agency in identifying and selecting a prospective postsecondary institution that they believe aligns with their academic, career, and personal goals.

Institutional fit. I use this term to mean the extent to which students perceive that a postsecondary institution aligns with their interests, aptitudes, and preferences. I include factors like availability of the desired course(s) of study, institutional reputation, and scholarly resources under "interests". I include factors like geographic location, possibility for migration, and cost as well as the opportunity to prepare for one's chosen career under "preferences".

Research Questions

This study used a qualitative design to better understand international students' experiences of agent-assisted Canadian postsecondary placement and the role of student choice in this process. As part of addressing this question, I explored how international students use agents to help them identify and apply to a range of suitable institutions and the degree to which their preferences drive this process.

The major research question was:

> What is the nature of the influence education agents have on student choice making in the Canadian postsecondary search process?
>
> a. What were the motivating factors in the student decision to hire an agent?
> b. What did students consider to be the affordances and limitations of agent involvement?
> c. From the student's perspective, what did the process of postsecondary placement via an agent involve, and what were the influencing factors?
> d. From the student's perspective, what role did role student choice play in this process?
> e. To what extent did students consider their institution to be a good fit?
> f. How satisfied were students with the search outcome?

Chapter Two: Review of the Literature and Theoretical Framework

In this chapter I will (1) review the literature on globalization, Canadian postsecondary education, student migration, student recruitment, education agents, and student choice as it relates to the research questions posed in this study; and (2) discuss the theoretical framework that informs how I explore the role student choice plays in agent-mediated postsecondary searches.

Globalization

Globalization has been a sustained focus of interest for scholars and a significant body of literature associated with this phenomenon has developed. Its ubiquity as a term obscures the degree to which its meaning, function, beneficiaries, and consequences continue to be vigorously contested (Knight, 2008). Globalization has been described as a cross border flow of people, wealth, data, policy, culture, knowledge, values, and ideas (Knight & de Wit, 1997; Marginson, 2009; Yang, 2000). Its impact and reach are neither universal nor consistent (Tilly, 2004; Tsing, 2005) and both vary considerably from place to place (Knight & de Wit, 1997; Yang & Vidovich, 2001). While all nations have arguably benefited to some degree from globalization (Johnson, 2002), one consistent outcome has been the consolidation of resources, power, and influence in nations already holding significant advantage in these areas (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Yang, 2003). Moreover, this global flow functions as a conduit through which dominant societies extend and expand their influence over other nations' aspirations, cultures, economies, peoples, and politics (Currie, DeAngelis, deBoer, Huisman & Lacotte, 2003). As Yang and Vidovich (2001) have observed, globalization has divided the world into threes: "those who globalize, those who are globalized, and those who are excluded by globalization."

Knight (2008) has identified five key elements of globalization: the knowledge society; information and communication technologies; the market economy; trade liberalization; and change in governance structures (p. 5). Florida (2006) describes the emergence of a globalized high-skills, high-wage knowledge economy as a shift "from an economy based on physical inputs –land, capital, and labor – to an economy based on intellectual inputs, or human creativity" (p. 22). Success in the knowledge economy requires an environment that fosters the generation of "new ideas [that] can ultimately be transformed into marketable goods and services" (Mueller, 2007, p. 1). This global flow of capital, talent, and ideas requires organizations and governments to compete within and across borders to attract and retain members of what Florida (2002) calls the *creative class*: "a fast-growing, highly educated, and well-paid segment of the workforce on whose efforts corporate profits and economic growth increasingly depend" (p. 17). Joining this creative class obliges individuals to acquire the skills and expertise necessary to compete. Postsecondary institutions are expected to play a critical role in the knowledge economy as attractors and developers of talent and as incubators of innovation (Duderstadt, 2002; Florida, Gates, Knudsen & Stolarick, 2006; Gürüz, 2011).

This framing of postsecondary education as central to economic productivity reveals the extent to which neoliberal rationales drive globalization (Beck, 2009). Globalization has been described as unfettered and universalized capitalism aided by technological innovation (Yang & Vidovich, 2001) and its ascendance has been marked by corporate consolidation (Tsing, 2005), pressure on the public sector to adopt market-based approaches and objectives (Beck, 2009), and an enthusiasm for privatization (Skolnik, 2005). Scholars have argued that globalization presents both opportunities and challenges for postsecondary education (Scott, 1998; as cited in Currie et al, 2003; Marginson & Van der Wende, 2007). Even as unprecedented amounts of private capital

have been invested in higher education (Altbach & Knight, 2007), this support is often targeted to research, programs, and activities that promote workforce and economic development goals. Meanwhile, declining levels of public support have pressured institutions to become more entrepreneurial, reinforcing the view of higher education as both a commodity to be traded and a private benefit rather than a public good (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Burnett & Huisman, 2009).

This pressure is a primary impetus behind postsecondary institutional efforts to pursue *internationalization.* Frequently confused with globalization (Altbach, 2004; Knight, 2012), internationalization is amorphous (Gacel-Avila, 2005) and often means different things to different people (Bartell, 2003; Spaulding, Mauch & Lin, 2001). Knight (2008) has defined it as a process of "integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions, or delivery of higher education" (p. 21). Many scholars have argued that internationalization is more pluralistic (Currie et al, 2003), facilitates more egalitarian exchanges (Altbach & Knight, 2007), is less explicitly driven by market ideologies, and is integrative (Trilokekar, 2009), though claims that it is more neutral or moral than globalization have been contested (Beck, 2009; Brandenburg & de Wit, 2011).

Ellingboe (1998) has described five components of campus internationalization: institutional leadership; the level of faculty involvement in international research activities and collaboration; accessibility and affordability of study abroad opportunities; the presence and successful integration of international students and scholars; and internationally focused co-curricular programs and activities (p. 205). For the purpose of this study, the most salient of these pertains to international student recruitment.

International Student Recruitment (ISR)

In this section I focus specifically on international student recruitment as a strategic activity intended to advance both academic and economic objectives. To begin, I provide a working definition of international student recruitment. I discuss why countries and institutions choose to engage in recruitment activities and what objectives they hope to satisfy. I describe the countries that are currently most active in international recruitment. I identify and describe four different types of common recruitment activities, situating the use of education agents within other strategies that institutions, industry, and governments pursue. Lastly, I problematize the relationship that institutions have with agents and suggest that institutional administrators may perceive strategic value in maintaining a distance from the work agents do.

In this study I use *international student recruitment (ISR)* to refer to activities, (institutional and governmental) policies, programs, and services designed to encourage prospective students to apply to and matriculate at a postsecondary institution outside their home country. Recruitment activities may be aimed at influencing a prospective student to select a particular country or sub-national jurisdiction (e.g., a Canadian province) as an educational destination, a specific postsecondary institution, or both.

Motivating factors. Postsecondary institutions and governments engage in international student recruitment for many different reasons. The OECD (2004; as cited in Rizvi and Lingard, 2006) has identified four rationales for postsecondary internationalization: promotion of mutual understanding; encouraging skilled migration; revenue generation; and capacity building. In this next section I review and discuss each of these with regard to how they motivate both institutions and governments alike to attract international students.

Mutual understanding. Governments have long seen political advantage in the

recruitment of international students, particularly from regions where they sought to bolster or expand their spheres of influence (Knight & de Wit, 1995). During the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union funded schemes intended to encourage students from both client and nonaligned states to pursue postsecondary opportunities in their countries. Assuming many of these students were destined to hold political office on returning home, both sides hoped that their guests' postsecondary experiences would leave them favorably disposed toward their former hosts (Healey, 2007). These and similar programs have continued in the post-Cold War era, with the emergence of new actors and beneficiaries reflecting shifts in the political environment. Chinese government funding of a scholarship program for African students to pursue postsecondary education at Chinese universities is a useful example of this (Brown, 2012). Postsecondary institutions cite significant cultural and pedagogical benefits that are derived from the presence of international students on campus (Jang, 2009; Knight, 1997). Former Harvard president Neil Rudenstine (1997; as cited in Peterson, Briggs, Dreasher, Horner & Nelson, 1999) has asserted, "There is simply no substitute for direct contact with talented people from other countries and cultures. We benefit from international students; they drive research and teaching in new directions that are very fruitful" (p. 67).

Encouraging skilled migration. As I have said elsewhere, achieving prosperity in a knowledge economy rests on a country's ability to attract and retain highly skilled workers (Mueller, 2007). Not surprisingly, many of the countries that attract the majority of migrants have put in place immigration policies that establish explicit preferences for highly skilled immigrants (Docquier & Marfouk, 2006). International students who have completed a postsecondary credential are often considered to be just as valuable (if not more so) to the host country for several reasons. Their postsecondary credential is recognized and valued by

prospective employers in the host country. (This is often a problem for skilled migrants, who must abandon their previous occupations on arrival when they learn their qualifications are not recognized in the host country (Government of Alberta, 2004). Their persistence to graduation suggests that they have both successfully adapted to life in the host country and (where necessary) become fluent in the language in use there. Lastly, the personal and professional networks they have established make it even more likely that they will thrive and contribute. To this end, many governments have adopted immigration policies that provide an expedited pathway to permanent residency and citizenship for international students who have completed a postsecondary credential in the host country (Verbik & Lasanowski, 2007). The extent to which developed countries rely on skilled migration varies. Not surprisingly, many of the countries with aggressive recruitment strategies are experiencing skilled labor shortages or else projecting them. Verbik and Lasanowski (2007) have observed that approximately one in five current Canadian citizens were born outside the country: "an indication that the country is already reliant on the skills of the…international students who annually enroll there" (p. 2). In nearly every instance where a developed country is projecting a skilled labor shortage, its postsecondary institutions have been assigned a significant role in efforts to attract and acclimate new migrants. These responsibilities bring both opportunity and challenge to postsecondary institutions. While they generate investment from the private sector (Altbach & Knight, 2007) and help make the case for continued public funding in an era of fiscal austerity, they also bind institutions closer to neoliberal utilitarian rationales that posit higher education as workforce development. This may help make academic programs that are seen as less germane to worker training vulnerable to funding cuts.

Revenue generation. International students collectively make a significant positive impact on their host countries' economies. This is a significant motivating factor for countries and institutions to engage in what Room (2000) calls *academic entrepreneurialism*, a term he uses to describe a trend in which postsecondary institutions are "becoming more entrepreneurial in the competition to recruit extra students and to win private and commercial research funding" (p. 110). The Canadian government published a report in 2012 indicating that international students at Canadian postsecondary institutions in 2010 spent nearly C$8 billion and created over 85,000 jobs (DFAIT, 2012a). In much the same way that some governments seek to expand their political influence by educating international students who then return home, many governments also hope that newly returned students will lead to expanded trade opportunities and investment between host and home country (Government of Manitoba, 2009; Knight & de Wit, 1995). The importance of international students as a revenue source for postsecondary institutions varies markedly by country, but may be of particular importance in countries where public support for higher education is in decline. For example, while German universities do not charge a differential tuition rate for non-German or EU nationals (Becker & Kolster, 2012), full-fee paying international students in Australia accounted for fully one quarter of total enrollment in 2007 (Marginson, 2007), in essence underwriting the expansion of the country's postsecondary sector. Choudaha and Chang (2012) have noted that the number of international students at some Australian postsecondary institutions exceeds 60% of total enrollment (p. 5-6). Whereas at one time many students from developing countries received government sponsorship as part of a development scheme, most international students travel under their own auspices. As Li and Bray (2007) have concluded, "student mobility is now viewed less as aid and more as trade" (p. 792).

Capacity building. An increase in international student enrollment can advance institutional or national capacity-building efforts in a number of ways. At the graduate level, talented international students can assist faculty members with research, conduct their own, teach courses, and take up places in programs where domestic demand has waned – all for a comparatively modest cost. At the undergraduate level, international students generate both revenue for postsecondary institutions and may be an important source of new students for schools whose traditional catchment areas are mature or in decline. More broadly, it can be argued that the Australian postsecondary sector could not have reached the capacity it currently has without international students. Many Australian postsecondary institutions enroll international students in proportions seen nowhere else in the world (Marginson, 2011). In fact, Australia's overdependence on revenue from international students may have depressed admission standards at many postsecondary institutions. Verbik and Lasanowski (2007) have cited a 2006 report that found "the English-language abilities of 33% of Australian fee-paying foreign graduates were so poor that they should never have been granted a visa" (p. 28-29).

Governments and postsecondary institutions often work in partnership when different institutional and governmental policy objectives can be satisfied by the same outcome. For example, an increase in the numbers of international students benefits both the host institution (increased revenue, enhancement of the educational environment) and the receiving country (an economic boost, a potential source of highly skilled migrants) (DFAIT, 2012a; Industry Canada, 2008; Kizilbash, 2001; Roslyn Kunin & Associates, 2012). Collaborative efforts are constrained when one party perceives another's actions to have an adverse impact on another area of policy concern. For example, the perception that postsecondary institutions have not exercised due

diligence with regard to ensuring international applicants are not misusing the student visa pathway may trigger government concerns and calls for additional oversight and regulation.

Most active countries and institutions in ISR. Even as students from nearly everywhere travel nearly everywhere for postsecondary education (UNESCO, 2014), several destination countries absorb a disproportionate share of international students while several sending countries account for a significant percentage of the total population. The U.S., U.K., and Australia (in that order) are currently the three leading destination countries, with the U.S. attracting 1 in 5 international students (UNESCO, 2014). In any given year France, Germany, Japan, or Canada are often ranked fourth or fifth. The continued popularity of English as a medium of instruction helps explain in part the dominance of Anglophone countries, and explains the growth in courses offered in English by postsecondary institutions in countries like Germany, Sweden, and the Netherlands (Woodfield, 2010, p. 113). While Canada has been considered an underperformer in relation to its comparators (Kizilbash, 2011; Room, 2000; Verbik & Lasanowski, 2007), a new Canada-wide marketing campaign (Steenkamp, 2008) in conjunction with coordinated federal-provincial efforts (Wang, 2009) appears to have born fruit. Over a seven year period from 2002 through 2009 international enrollment at Canadian postsecondary institutions increased by 67%: the biggest percentage gains among top destination countries (Choudaha and Chang, 2012, p. 6).

Primary stakeholders in the international recruitment process generate a significant proportion of the published research related to this subject. For example, many recruitment agencies, government agencies that market postsecondary opportunities abroad, and professional associations conduct and publish their own research. Most of the reports they generate describe student migration and recruitment efforts in economic terms—countries "compete against one

another in a high-stakes battle" (Advisory Panel on Canada's International Education Strategy, 2012) to improve their "share" (Choudaha & Chang, 2012). A particular country's "brand" may need updating (Kizilbash, 2011) if it is going to improve its chances of attracting "top talent" (Advisory Panel on Canada's International Education Strategy, 2012). The "supply and demand" in a particular "recruitment market" (Becker & Kolster, 2012) may rise and fall depending on regional economic circumstances. These reports often include assessments of each country's efforts, including analysis of policy initiatives and marketing campaigns designed to influence international students' choice of an education destination.

As I have discussed earlier, receiving countries can expect to realize significant benefits through successful international recruitment. This is why many of them invest in campaigns marketing themselves as educational destinations. These campaigns typically promote the destination country's quality of life (including safety and security), extol the quality and reputations of its postsecondary institutions and the accomplishments of faculty and alumni, orient students to the postsecondary sector, and provide general information like finding accommodations and applying for a student visa (Agence Campus France, 2012; Australian Trade Commission, 2011; British Council, 2012; DFAIT Canada, 2012b; DAAD, 2012). The challenge international students face in determining institutional quality and fit in an unfamiliar postsecondary system may make coordinated national campaigns particularly useful. A 2004 OECD report (as cited in Marginson, 2007a) found that many international students choose based on the "perceived quality of postsecondary education in a given country rather than in a specific institution" (p. 12).

Rankings are frequently used to assess how countries are faring in the competition for international students, but different studies purporting to measure success often deliver different

messages. For example, a 2009 report by the OECD reported favorably on Canada's efforts, remarking that international enrollment had "more than doubled since 2000" (p. 320), putting Canada's share at 5.2%, one tier below that of the "five major destinations" (the U.S., U.K., Australia, Germany, and France) (p. 321). In contrast, a 2007 report prepared for the Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE) cited OECD data indicating that "Canada…now ranks 14th in the OECD in terms of percentage of foreign students studying at its institutions" (p. 7). A 2007 report by Verbik and Lasanowski for the Observatory on Borderless Higher Education assigned Canada (along with Japan and New Zealand) to the category of "evolving destinations" – the third of four tiers of destination countries (p. 2). Given that policymakers, postsecondary administrators, and other opinion leaders are usually the intended audience for these reports, these rankings may be crafted to create or reinforce a sense of urgency or momentum with regard to a particular country's standing.

Postsecondary institutions also engage directly in international recruitment, but not all of them do. Marginson (2007; 2009) has divided the sector into the "super-league" – colleges and universities in the uppermost tier with regard to reputation – and everyone else. Super-league institutions "have gained unprecedented visibility and immediacy in the global era…their degrees and research carry exceptional credibility, and the leading group are household names" (p. 10). Maintaining their super-elite status requires these institutions to limit access by maintaining exceedingly high standards of admission. Since their reputations make them "global demand magnets" (Marginson, 2007, p. 10), they do not need to use education agents to stimulate student interest and awareness.

The lack of name recognition poses a significant challenge to postsecondary institutions outside of this super-league tier. Faced with a bewildering array of institutions, programs, degree

types, and nomenclature that frequently vary from country to country, international students and their families often rely on reputation as shorthand for institutional quality (Bodycott, 2009). A good reputation also increases the likelihood of word-of-mouth referral (Hoskins, 2012). Both reputation and word-of-mouth referral are among the most significant variables in the postsecondary selection process for international students (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002, p. 85). Since very few students (international or otherwise) gain admission to super-elite universities, most international students must ultimately choose from a range of second-tier institutions that – initially, at least – are largely unfamiliar to them. Attracting international students therefore obliges less- or non-elite institutions to find ways to differentiate themselves from their peers and increase their name recognition while satisfying prospective students' questions about quality and fit. This requires these institutions to commit to sustained international marketing and recruitment campaigns.

Recruitment strategies. Government and institutional recruitment strategies take a variety of forms. Though they sometimes act on their own, often the cost, complexity, and time involved in international recruitment lead them to seek assistance from a third party (Davis, 2009; Kallur, 2009; Steele, 2010). The nature of these third party relationships varies considerably, from one-time transactions to more extensive partnerships. Print media, social media, web sites, advertising and other promotional materials represent efforts to influence or encourage students to consider a particular institution or country. Governments can also influence patterns of student migration through the development and implementation of immigration and student visa policies. All of these international recruitment strategies can be divided into four general categories: *marketing, policy incentives, direct engagement,* and *third party partnerships*. These categories are not necessarily discrete ones and some recruitment

activities may fit into more than one category. In this section I review and discuss each of these categories and provide examples.

Marketing. This category includes recruitment activities that involve advertising campaigns that feature a specific postsecondary institution, network of institutions, sub-national jurisdiction, or country (Tamburri, 2008; 2009). Examples of marketing include development of a website (Gomes & Murphy, 2003) or print publications targeted at prospective international students (Hoskins, 2012); placing an advertisement or paying for an article in a publication for international students developed by a private company. As I have mentioned elsewhere, international students and their families often use institutional reputation as a marker of quality. Their unfamiliarity with all but the most elite schools often leads them to settle first on a particular country as an educational destination, then investigate what postsecondary options are available there (Baluja, 2012; Hazelkorn, 2008). In response to this, many countries have developed brand identity campaigns to promote themselves to international students (DFAIT, 2012b). These campaigns aim to leverage the positive reputations many top destination countries enjoy by extending it in a sense to its lesser-known postsecondary institutions.

Policy incentives. This category includes policy strategies by governments intended to attract international students, usually in the hope that they will settle permanently (Dreher & Poutvaara, 2005). Such policies generally respond to one of four areas of interest for prospective students: the student visa process, funding, work authorization, and permanent residency. The perception that a student visa is difficult or easy to obtain can influence the trajectory of international student migration (Anderson, 2005). Declines in international enrollment coupled with delays in visa processing in competitor destination countries may have prompted the Australian government's decision in 2011 to end most restrictions on the issuing of student visas.

Moreover, Australian postsecondary institutions that agree to standardize certain admissions criteria are now granted access to a streamlined visa process for their international applicants (Maslen, 2011). Many countries hoping to attract international students have established funding schemes to support postsecondary studies, particularly at the graduate level. Some programs support international development or diplomatic efforts and target students from developing countries, while others are intended to raise the sponsoring country's global research profile (General Accounting Office, 2008). Policies allowing international students greater opportunities to work in the destination country are intended to both satisfy international students' need for funding and position them for success in the workforce as potential skilled migrants. For example, in 2005 the Canadian government established a new policy with regard to work authorization for international students. Under this new policy international students could now work off-campus and, after graduation, could work full time for up to two years (Wang, 2009).

Direct engagement. This category includes recruitment activities in which government or postsecondary institutional representatives are in direct contact with international students, their families, teachers, or other education administrators. Examples of direct engagement include sending admissions personnel or faculty members to staff a display at an education fair overseas; development of an alumni network in a sending country to assist with recruitment (Kallur, 2009; Willis & Kennedy, 2004); or participating in a recruitment tour of secondary institutions and meeting with teachers and counselors (Davis, 2009). Countries like Australia and the U.K. have set up global networks of offices that coordinate promotional activities in-country (Deupree, 2002). Direct engagement activities have both benefits and drawbacks. They limit the possibility that prospective students will receive inaccurate or outdated information and help institutions evade the controversy associated with the use of paid-commission agents or agencies. Students

and their parents may view alumni and faculty representatives as credible and useful sources of information (Hossler, 1999). As stated earlier, sustaining a recruitment effort internationally is a complex and costly endeavor (Davis, 2009) and strategies that have worked domestically may not translate well for international audiences (Smith, 1999). Equipping admissions staff and volunteers with the knowledge needed to be effective in a different legal, cultural, and political environment may require extensive training and money (Kallur, 2009; NACAC, 2012; Smith, 1999). At times, admissions officers may contract with third party vendors to facilitate direct engagement activities. For example, an institution may pay to participate in a recruitment tour of high schools organized by a private agency (Davis, 2009).

Third party partnerships. This category consists of recruitment (and in some cases instructional) activities that a postsecondary institution has contracted with a private vendor to operate or administer. The nature of these partnerships varies. An institution may sign a contract with a third party to facilitate direct engagement activities, as in the earlier example of the recruitment tour. They may hire agents or an agency that manages its own network of agents. These agents then recruit and assist prospective students in a particular region or city on the institution's behalf. An institution may also work with a government agency like EducationUSA or the British Council to support or extend international recruitment efforts.

Pathway programs. The most expansive partnerships involve the establishment of pathway programs. Though fairly new to North America, pathway programs have existed in Australia for decades. Over half of all international students studying for a postsecondary credential in Australia began their studies in a pathway program (Adams, Levanthal, Connelly, Deardorff, de Wit & Heyl, 2012, p. 413). A pathway program is a hybrid international recruitment-instruction delivery service that institutions contract with third-party private vendors to provide (Wood,

Duncan & Dawkins, 2011). The vendor – usually a recruitment agency with its own network of agents – recruits international students to a foundational year program that it operates on the institution's campus (Steele, 2010). Agents target students whose grades, test scores, or English proficiency make them unlikely to be admitted directly to the institution. Instead they apply and are admitted to the vendor's pathway program. In the program, students take courses intended both to improve their English skills and meet institutional prerequisites needed for regular admission as second-year students. Students live in residence and have access to campus resources, for which the vendor compensates the institution (Day, 2006; Pearson, 2010). The vendor administers the pathway courses and selects and hires instructors (usually moonlighting adjunct and faculty instructors from the host campus). The institution generally receives a percentage of the tuition for all credit-bearing courses (Redden, 2010d). Proponents of pathway programs describe dividends for all sides. Students with the desire but not the grades or fluency in English needed for admission get an alternative pathway to an overseas credential. Postsecondary institutions secure a secondary stream of international students who meet admissions criteria and are already acclimated to campus. Recruiting agencies expand their recruitment pool to include otherwise inadmissible students.

The introduction of pathway programs in North America has been met with controversy (Millar, 2010; Redden, 2010a; 2010b). Some have criticized the decision by campus administrators to outsource responsibility for educating students to non-unionized and potentially less-qualified adjunct staff at a for-profit company (Millar, 2010; Redden, 2010c; 2010d; Santin, 2008). Others have argued that it is inappropriate for a private company to trade on the promise of matriculation to a public institution, or to leverage campus resources and space to profit from their student clients (Larsen, 2012b; Steele, 2010). As one University of Manitoba professor

characterized the pathway program on her campus, "It is not a school, not a college, not a university: it's an educational franchise. A Tim Horton's of teaching that uses property local taxpayers have paid for and cashes in" (Pearson, 2010).

Education agents. Education agents have attracted even more controversy. In the first chapter, I introduced agents as individuals or agencies that assist international students in the postsecondary search process. While the focus of the present study is on postsecondary institutions, it is worth noting that Canada engages in international recruitment activities at nearly all levels of the education sector (DFAIT, 2012c). Agents also represent (private and public) schools and school districts and recruit students as young as six or seven. The 88 school districts currently represented by the Canadian Association of Public Schools-International (CAPS-I) currently enroll approximately 20,000 international students in kindergarten through high school (Thomas, 2012).

At the postsecondary level agents usually work on commission for institutions hoping to attract international applicants. They receive a percentage of the total first year tuition for every admissible student who matriculates. While their use varies from country to country, agents are very active in top sending countries like China and India. Agents may work for themselves as independent consultants or for larger agencies. These circumstances determine to some degree how transparent their work is. While agent use and pathway programs both rely on third party vendors to engage in recruitment activities on the institution's behalf, these strategies are more dissimilar than they are alike. Pathway program providers are usually multinational corporations that operate on campuses across the globe. They hire, train, manage, and monitor their own network of recruiters; develop their own marketing campaigns (in consultation with host campuses); and track their student clients' performance in the foundation programs they

administer. While recruitment activities occur at a considerable distance from host campuses, assessment of the foundation program and its graduates provides postsecondary administrators (and critics) with a ready means of evaluating program activities. Although this isn't always the case (Heller, 2008), institutional leaders sometimes involve campus stakeholders in public deliberation when considering the establishment of a pathway program. In some cases, opposition from faculty and students has influenced institutional decisions not to go forward with pathway programs (Pearson, 2010). Once established, by their nature these programs are quite visible. Students enrolled in the program take their courses on the host campus, use campus resources, and ultimately apply to transfer in as second-year students.

In contrast, education agents and the ways in which they operate are not visible at all on the campuses for which they recruit. In fact it is likely that many faculty, students, and administrators on campuses that use education agents are quite unaware of the practice. Both students and institutions often must rely on word-of-mouth when weighing the decision of whether to do business with a particular agent (Krasocki, 2002).

Several factors contribute to this opacity. While some agents work for recruitment agencies, many more work independently. It is not unusual for one institution to work with hundreds of individual agents (Read, 2012) and for individual agents to represent upwards of 70 institutions (NACAC, 2012). Agents work at considerable distances from the campuses for which they recruit. This distance and the cost and logistical challenges associated with bridging it inform institutional rationales for the use of agents (Deupree, 2011; Robison, 2007), but also make effective institutional oversight of them difficult. In this area even pathway programs are vulnerable, for they also rely on decentralized networks of agents to generate applicants. In one recent case involving a pathway program at the University of Manitoba, an international student

reported being directed by an agent to the pathway program even as his English proficiency and grade reports qualified him for direct admission to the university (Larsen, 2012a).

Distance might not fully explain this lack of institutional oversight. Significant variance with regard to how institutions select and contract with agents, what expectations they set, and what training they provide suggests that some institutions may perceive an advantage in remaining at a distance from the work their agents do. When receiving an unsolicited bid from a prospective agent (a weekly occurrence in many admissions departments), many admissions administrators rely on informal collegial networks at other institutions to vet the person (Coffey & Perry, 2014). Others might instead tell the agent to recruit and forward several admissible applicants as a means of assessing their abilities (Coffey & Perry, 2014).

While some institutions use a standard written contract that sets out specific expectations for how the agent is to represent the institution (Weller, McCabe & Hall, 2010), others reach very informal understandings with agents largely focused on what compensation they are to receive (Coffey & Perry, 2014). Some institutions provide training on programs of study and admissions requirements (Adams, Levanthal & Connelly, 2012; Cushing, 2011) while others provide none at all, assuming that agents will educate themselves if they are to be successful in role (Coffey & Perry, 2014). Many institutions appear disinclined to ask even basic questions about the nature of the work agents do with prospective applicants. A survey conducted by *Times Higher Education* found that most of the universities that took part "had little idea how their agents were operating". Nearly seven out of ten institutions surveyed did not know whether their agents charged students a fee, while nearly four out of five did not know whether their agents disclosed to students how much they made in commission (Matthews, 2012).

Almost no research exists documenting how institutional administrators engage with

agents, and thus little is known about the nature of this relationship. As for what advantage administrators perceive by maintaining a distance from agent work, several possibilities suggest themselves. Institutions may be reluctant to set expectations that would be difficult for them to enforce. Training and supervising a far-flung network of agents carry a significant cost (Weller, McCabe & Hall, 2010). Since institutions use agents as a cost-saving strategy, they may be unwilling to invest time and money in them.

Institutions also use agents to manage the challenge of recruiting in an unfamiliar environment in which cultural norms may be quite different from their own (Redden, 2010a). Even as they might suspect their agents' practices wouldn't pass muster at home, administrators may also conclude that it is an accepted (and even ubiquitous) way of doing business in the sending country and not object (and risk being put at a competitive disadvantage). Some university administrators may simply be more interested in the desired outcome and less or even uninterested in the process used to achieve it. A 2011 article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* on international recruitment included this exchange between a recruitment agency representative and a U.S. postsecondary administrator:

> "Tom Melcher…of Zinch China was contacted by the provost of a large American university who wanted to recruit 250 Chinese students, stat. When asked why, the provost replied that his institution faced a yawning budget deficit. To fill it, he told Mr. Melcher, the university needed additional students who could pay their own way, and China has many of them" (Bartlett & Fischer, 2011).

In this section, I have identified and described several factors that prompt institutional and government interest in attracting international students, and what broader objectives they hope to achieve. I explained that certain countries and certain types of institutions engage in recruitment and provided a rationale for why this is. I introduced four different types of common recruitment activities, including the use of education agents as a kind of controversial partnership between

institutions and private third-party vendors. In this next section I shift focus to student migration as another context for this study.

Student Migration

In this section, I introduce the global flow of student migration as another context for this study. I begin with a discussion of the dimensions of this flow: how many students seek education abroad, where they come from, and where they go. I review what is known about the motivating factors for seeking postsecondary education outside one's home country and what benefits or advantages they believe the credential will provide. I argue that migration and resettlement is the primary objective for many students (Baas, 2006; 2007; 2010) and thus earning a degree in the destination country is a means to that end. I argue that the influx of full-fee paying international students with low-English proficiency and (at times) falsified grade records is sometimes accommodated because they advance institutional and/or government policy objectives. I then review the literature on student choice, consider how the search process may be different for international students, and then describe current models of student choice with this in mind.

UNESCO (2014) defines *international* or *internationally mobile students* as "students who have crossed a national border to study." UNESCO (2014) estimates that approximately 4 million students were enrolled in postsecondary institutions abroad in 2012—a 100% increase from 2000. Scholars attribute this growth to middle class expansion combined with insufficient postsecondary capacity in developing countries with rapidly expanding economies (Verbik & Lasanowski, 2007).

As I have discussed earlier, several countries absorb a disproportionate share of this migratory flow of students (Dreher & Poutvaara, 2005; OECD, 2009). Similarly, a handful of

countries represent the majority of internationally mobile students. China and India, for example, currently account for 1 out of 5 students studying abroad, with South Korea rounding out the top three sending countries (UNESCO, 2014). Saudi Arabia, Vietnam, Brazil, and Mexico have been described as emerging sending countries (Choudaha & Chang, 2012).

Influencing factors. Many factors contribute to the trajectory of student migration. Historical ties have shaped the development of the education system in many former colonies (Altbach, 2009; Bolsmann & Miller, 2008; CERI, 2004; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). This often includes a shared language of instruction, educational levels, credentials, and historical ties between postsecondary institutions (CERI, 2004; Perkin, 2006). This shared history helps explain the robust flow of students from francophone Africa to postsecondary institutions in France (Verbik & Lasanowski, 2007), as well as why so many French students choose to study in Québec (Racine, Villeneuve & Thériault, 2003).

Economic and security issues also affect student migration. When families' household wealth increases, financing a child's postsecondary education abroad becomes more plausible (Yang, 2007). When an economic crisis befalls a particular country or region, applications from prospective students dry up (McMurtrie, 2012). International enrollment in the U.S. declined after the government introduced post-9/11 restrictions on student visas in an effort to bolster border security. Many students hoping to study in the U.S. instead chose alternatives like Canada as educational destinations (Mueller, 2007). Even as the number of international students in the U.S. has rebounded (IIE, 2013), the perception that the U.S. student visa process is a significant barrier persists. In a survey of international students in ten countries conducted in 2009 and 2010 by the Institute of International Education (IIE), half of respondents reported concerns about obtaining a U.S. visa (2012; p. 3). In another example of how safety concerns can impact student

migration, a series of attacks on Indian students in several Australian cities over a three-year period received widespread coverage in India and in countries that are home to much of the Indian diaspora (Baty, 2010). The attacks, and the perceived lack of a robust response from Australian governments (Marginson, 2010) led to a significant decline in Indian applicants to Australian postsecondary institutions.

Choudaha, Orosz and Chang (2012) have outlined a typology of U.S.-bound international student based on their financial resources and academic preparedness and suggest that these factors influence how students conduct a postsecondary search, what kinds of information they find helpful, and the kinds of institutions they select. The largest segment of U.S.-bound international students, *strivers* are students with high academic preparedness but low financial resources. *Strugglers* have both low academic preparedness and financial resources. They're more likely to need academic support services and are less concerned about institutional reputation. *Explorers* have low academic preparedness but high financial resources. Fortunate enough to have the means to go abroad but lacking the grades and English proficiency needed for admission to elite institutions, most plan to attend a second-tier university or college. Given the unfamiliarity many international students have with institutions outside of the super-elite (Marginson, 2007), this may explain why explorers are the most likely group to use an agent. *Highfliers* have both high academic preparedness and financial resources. Possessed of both the grades needed for admission to the elite institutions and the means to pay for it, reputation matters most to students in this group (p. 7).

Much has been written about the factors that influence both the decision to seek postsecondary education abroad and the selection of a particular destination country. Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) have described a three-stage process leading from the decision to seek

postsecondary education abroad to the selection of a host country and finally a particular institution. They identified a series of push and pull factors that influence student decision-making in this process. *Push factors* are those factors at work in the student's home country that influence the student to look elsewhere for postsecondary opportunities, while *pull factors* are those factors that influence the choice of a particular country. Based on surveys of prospective undergraduate and graduate students in four Asian countries, their model identified four primary push factors: the perception that overseas programs of study were of higher quality; lack of access to an equivalent program in the home country (either due to high admission standards or else that it simply didn't exist); a desire to gain a better understanding of the West; and an intention to migrate to the destination country (p. 88). These largely correspond to the results of a 2001 study published by EduWorld (as cited in CERI, 2004) that involved a survey of 1,000 students from ten Asian countries. The survey identified several push factors: the perception that overseas postsecondary education was of higher quality and better reputation; lack of domestic access to an equivalent program; family or personal interest in the student acquiring international experience; and the desire to improve English proficiency (p. 172). Research by Bodycott (2009) on pull factors for Chinese students identified institutional reputation; knowledge of the destination country; word of mouth from family and friends; cost; safety; climate; geographic proximity; family or social networks in-country; and the possibility of migration as motivating factors (p. 354).

Mazzarol, Kemp and Savery (1997; as cited in Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002) have described six pull factors influencing selection of a particular destination country: overall knowledge and awareness of the host country; recommendations from family and friends; cost issues (including both financial and safety/security); the environment (both physical and social); geographic

proximity to the home country; and social links (the presence of family and friends in the host country) (p; 83). A set of factors included in a 2004 report by the CERI largely corresponds to this and other criteria mentioned in this section, including: language of instruction; cultural and historical ties; quality of life; alumni networks; availability of the desired program of study; reputation of the destination country, its education system and postsecondary institutions; cost; the availability of support services; portability of earned credentials; and the possibility of securing permission to work or migrate (p. 30).

Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) have identified several pull factors influencing institutional selection, based on a survey of international and domestic students enrolled in Australian universities. These include: the reputation of both the institution and its faculty; word of mouth from alumni; connections with other institutions more familiar to the student; the number of students enrolled; and the institution's willingness to recognize the student's qualifications (p. 89). A survey by Ahmad (2006) of Indian students enrolled in Australia reached the same conclusions. A concern for reputation and quality is common to most of these pulls factors and this finding is consonant with research I have discussed earlier. Additionally, these factors all involve identifying credible sources and gathering specific information considered determinative in making a good decision. As Gomes and Murphy (2003) have observed, "[S]ince education is intangible, it is hard for prospective students to investigate and verify claims…[As such, r]eliable information from a reputable and independent source is key to education choices" (p. 119).

Reference groups. This work helps us understand the *what* (motivating factors influencing the postsecondary search). Others have sought better understanding of the *who* (individuals who exercise influence over student decision-making). In the aggregate, these individuals are called *reference groups*. Pimpa (2001; 2003; 2005; 2008) has published extensively on the international

postsecondary search process for Thai students. He identified three primary reference groups: family members, peers, and agents. His research found that all three exert influence in different ways at different stages of the search, and that student personal characteristics may mediate the effects (2001; 2008). Pimpa identifies five categories or influencing factors: *finance* (the family's ability and willingness to fund the student's education); *information* (the extent to which others' experience of postsecondary education abroad influences the student's decision-making); *expectation* (the extent to which influencers' values and opinions shape student decision-making); *persuasion* (leveraging a relationship with the student to influence their decision-making); and *competition* (concern for social rivalries and status informing efforts to influence student decision-making). While the influence from family members extends across all five categories (2001; 2005), peers' influence is limited to information, competition, and persuasion, while agents' influence is limited to information and persuasion (2001; 2003).

Parents. Cultural orientation may assign decision-making responsibilities to parents in the postsecondary search. In his article on the criteria Chinese parents and students use when evaluating an education destination, Bodycott (2009) references the concept of *xiao qin*, or filial piety: "The concept of *xiao qin*…is reciprocal in nature: parents will sacrifice…to ensure their child receives the best education. [In exchange, Chinese children are expected to "exhibit an unquestioned compliance with the views of parents and as such choose a study abroad destination…in order to please his or her parents, even though the choice does not fulfill his/her own wishes (Li, 2011)" (p. 351). This familial obligation includes extended family members: "Should…[an] extended family member recommend an institution or program, then such guidance would be highly regarded" (Bodycott, 2009, p. 362).

In a subsequent study, Bodycott and Lai (2012) surveyed Mainland students enrolled in

postsecondary institutions in Hong Kong about their postsecondary search experiences and specifically about the role their parents played. One hundred percent of students surveyed reported that their parents had used strategies "ranging from gentle cajoling to heavy-handed coercive approaches during family discussions…The tactics used included parents intervening in discussions and applications, imposing suggestions, and manipulating the application process" (p. 262). Ninety eight percent of students "expressed dissatisfaction with aspects of the decision-making process and/or with the outcome. However, all…accepted the decision. For…15% [of students], the parents were perceived by their child to ignore their preferences " (p. 265). Perhaps the most surprising result for North American readers—65% reported that their parents had made the decisions as to destination country, institution, and/or academic program of study (p. 264).

Parents and children may embrace xiao qin as both a cultural imperative and as a strategy to improve the family's economic circumstances. Li's (2001) study of Chinese immigrant parents in Ottawa found that their Confucian heritage and values dictated that their children pursue postsecondary education. As one respondent explained, "Over five thousand years of Confucian heritage have formed a firm belief that nothing is more important than formal education…Confucianism regards education as the most important thing in one's life. Probably this is why Chinese parents are willing to invest money and energy in their children's education" (p. 482). As Bodycott and Lai (2012) have observed, "for [Chinese parents], the choice of study in another country signifies a literal investment in [their] survival and [the] family's future. For among all other benefits associated with cross-border study, such study has the potential to lead to high-paid employment opportunities and citizenship status in the destination society" (p. 254). Chinese parents reported a willingness to make significant sacrifices to achieve this end: "taking on additional work, selling the house, or borrowing money from extended family" (Bodycott,

2009, p. 366).

Peers and agents. Peers and agents also influence student decisions though as Pimpa (2001; 2003) suggests, the scope of this influence may be more bounded then that of parents. In a survey of Indian students enrolled at an Australian branch campus in Singapore, 73% of respondents reported using an agent, mostly to help answer questions about programs of study, facilities, and fees (Bhati & Anderson, 2012, p. 1711). Even as they did not consider agents to be a major influence on their decision-making, 26% reported relying on the agent's advice when selecting the destination country, institution, and program of study (p. 1711). This aligns with Pimpa's finding that agent influence is confined to *information* and *persuasion* (since agents had presumably successfully recruited many survey participants to this university in Singapore). Peers with first-person experience of a particular destination or institution can often convince their friends to follow in their footsteps (Pimpa, 2001). As one Thai student recalled, "Information from my friend was very convincing…because we know each other very well. My parents believe that information from a friend with direct experience is much better than information from an…agent" (p. 10). The intense loyalty and commitment that typifies many Chinese students' friendships may also lend weight to recommendations from peers (Bodycott, 2009).

Other research suggests that parental involvement may minimize agent influence on student choice making. Bodycott (2009) has found that it is usually parents who hired and worked with agents, even as they were reluctant to trust their advice: "The main reason [for their mistrust] was the additional cost…solicited by agents above those paid directly to the institution being represented. The shared stories of friends and relatives who had been 'financially burned' by such practices were enough to make parents wary of an over-reliance on agents representing

institutions" (p. 358). The parents in Bodycott's survey had instead simply used the agents for information gathering. Students reported having little to no contact with the agent: their parents had handled the negotiations themselves (p. 358). Thai students in Pimpa's (2001) survey were equally ambivalent about how much to trust the agents they used. Students who were more self-reliant and proactive in the search process were more inclined to use agents as information sources while keeping them at arms-length, while more passive students relied on them more heavily. As one student commented, "I listened to them and received some information from them but I did not totally trust them" (p. 11).

Where may also affect *what* and *who* with regard to motivating influences on student decision-making. Research by Chen and Zimitat (2006) into the factors influencing Taiwanese students' to seek postsecondary education opportunities abroad found that the most important factors differed based on the destination country they had selected. For students who chose Australia, their own beliefs and perceptions about the country as a desirable destination was of greatest importance, while for students who chose the U.S., their families and peers were the strongest influence on the decision (p. 9).

These findings are relevant to the present study for several reasons. The push and pull factors I have reviewed stimulate and direct student interest in seeking postsecondary opportunities abroad, and it is clear that they inform the strategies destination countries use to attract them. Pimpa (2001) has described the postsecondary search process for Thai students as a "joint process between students and various others" (p. 19). Others clearly influence students' decision making, but the degree to which they do, over what aspects, and when may be culturally situated and thus varies by country. In particular, the degree to which parents influence and even dominate decision-making may limit the impact of agent involvement. Not only is little known

about this phenomenon, Bodycott (2009) has suggested that international recruiters ignore it at their peril: "Time spent understanding and catering for student needs may be counterproductive if it is the parent alone who makes the final decision" (p. 366). This suggests that North American postsecondary administrators may assume the search processes for international and domestic students are more alike than they really are. Given that these assumptions inform institutional recruitment strategies and admissions practice, this may lead some administrators to misread their prospective students and the recruitment environment.

This has implications for both students and postsecondary institutions. While both sides may reach an outcome they consider satisfactory, Jiang Xueqin (2011) has characterized this as a "marriage of convenience" with adverse consequences for both. He argues that the way in which U.S. institutions evaluate Chinese applicants fails to predict which students will thrive and contribute. Specifically, he suggests that an overreliance on standardized test scores preferences rote learners more focused on outcome (grades, a prestigious credential) than process (learning). He suggests a hypothetical interview with such a student would be difficult, as "what he wants to say he can't: that…his real passions are increasing his GPA and SAT score; that he hasn't really thought about which college he'd like to attend because he plans to attend the most highly ranked; that he's the one talking but it's really his parents who are pulling the strings". An accompanying article (Bartlett, 2011) in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* further elaborates on the difficulty U.S. institutions face in acclimating underprepared Chinese students who nevertheless met admissions requirements (either fraudulently or otherwise). Institutions unused to supporting international students may have underestimated the level of assistance they require, particularly if they arrive with more limited English and academic preparedness than their applications and test scores claimed. Jiang suggests the onus may be on postsecondary

institutions concerned about this to rethink how they recruit and support international students: "Are American universities unhappy? Because Chinese students and parents aren't…Nothing will change…unless American colleges make it clear to students and parents that it has to" (Bartlett, 2011).

Student choice. In the previous chapter I briefly summarized key findings from the student choice (also often referred to as *college choice*) literature. Chapman's (1981) model identified primary external influences: *significant persons; fixed college characteristics*, and *college efforts to communicate with students*. As with international students, parents (Flint, 1992; Moogan & Baron, 2003; Stage & Hossler, 1989) and siblings (Ceja, 2006), teachers, counselors, and peers (Chapman, 1981) all exercise influence on students' decision-making. Other scholars have considered how this influence is mediated by personal characteristics like race (Freeman, 1999; Hurtado, Inkalas, Briggs & Rhee, 1997; Perna, 2000), gender (Shank & Beasley, 1998; Stage & Hossler, 1989) and socio-economic status (Walpole, 2003) as well as how institutional characteristics like access to guidance counseling (Lee & Ekstrom, 1987), the availability of financial aid (Kim, 2004), location (Chapman, 1981), and perceived quality (Kealy & Rockel, 1987) affect student decision making.

The student choice literature also describes a multiple stage process through which students progress (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Kotler, 1976; Litten, 1982; Salisbury, Umbach, Paulsen & Pascarella, 2008), with consensus emerging on a three-stage model. As I have described earlier, students begin at the *predisposition* stage (broad goal setting and initial planning); progress to the *search* stage (information gathering and identification of target institutions), and end at the *choice* stage (application and selection) (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Salisbury, Umbach, Paulsen & Pascarella, 2008). In the U.S.

context, students typically begin this process as early as grade seven and continue through to graduation from high school and matriculation at a postsecondary institution (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000).

The literature on student migration and on student choice is alike in some ways and different in others. Both have roughly the same aim. The motivating factors and influences they have identified are often common to both populations. Both have described stage models through which students move. An important difference is that the student choice literature is anchored in a particular national context and attempts to explain how and why students choose to pursue postsecondary opportunities *within* their home country. As such, research findings are best understood within that country's socio-cultural context and their applicability to other countries may be limited. As much of the current student choice literature has originated in the U.S., the experiences of students elsewhere may not be accounted for in these research findings. Lastly, the student choice literature positions the student as the primary actor and decision maker even as others may have significant influence. The student migration literature suggests that this may not be the case in non-Western countries (Bodycott, 2009). Students outside the U.S. may face more pressure to accommodate others' needs and expectations (e.g., parents). Thus, their decision-making might be better understood in terms of negotiation and accommodation with these other reference groups.

Canadian Postsecondary Education

Several factors make the Canadian context for agent use in international student recruitment interesting and worthy of analysis. As I have mentioned earlier, the aggressive recruitment of international students marks a significant departure from past practice in the Canadian postsecondary sector. As Jones (2009) has observed, Canada's federal and provincial

governments have historically done very little to encourage postsecondary internationalization. The division of powers between the federal government and the provinces (where legal jurisdiction for education resides) (Allison, 2007; Cameron, 2005; Fisher et al., 2007; Trilokekar & Jones, 2007) has until recently confounded federal involvement. Moreover, postwar concerns about American cultural influence in Canada's rapidly expanding postsecondary sector (Mathews & Steele, 1969) prompted a policy focus on "Canadianization". Until fairly recently, policymakers and administrators worked from the "assumption that it was the Canadian, not the international, perspective that needed reinforcement" (Jones, 2009, p. 366). Given that expansion of the sector occurred to increase postsecondary access (Fisher et al., 2007; Jones, 1997), concerns that international students would displace domestic students constrained enthusiasm for overseas recruitment (Jones, 2009). In contrast to Australia's entrepreneurial approach to marketing postsecondary education overseas (Harman, 2004; Marginson, 2009; Shubert, Jones & Trilokekar, 2009) Canada's approach until recently had been considered "largely free of commercial motives" (Shubert, 2004; as cited in Weber, 2007, p. 41). Rather than viewing international students as a source of revenue (Rizvi, 2011), Canadian postsecondary administrators instead labored to determine the extent to which international students should pay (subsidized) domestic tuition rates (Jones, 2009).

The policy environment in Canada for international student recruitment has changed. A projected labor shortage by 2030 (Miner, 2010) has intensified government interest in attracting international students as a potential source of highly skilled migrants. In fact, this is a common rationale for government investment in efforts to encourage international student migration (Iredale, 2001). Gribble (2008) has noted "countries such as…Canada stand to benefit from international student migration, as they are able to fill skill shortages with locally trained foreign

students who also expand the demands for goods and services and add to gross national production" (p. 25). As in other countries, competing fiscal priorities have resulted in declining provincial funding for postsecondary education (Beach, Boadway & McInnis, 2005). Expanding international enrollment, therefore, becomes a means of augmenting institutional revenue.

For their part, Canadian postsecondary institutions are becoming destinations of choice for international students. With several universities ranked highly on influential league tables (Academic Ranking of World Universities, 2011; Times Higher Education, 2012) and a tradition of equal funding across all institutions (Shubert, Jones & Trilokekar, 2009), Canada's postsecondary institutions offer fairly consistent quality across the sector (even as reputational quality varies). Tuition rates at public institutions are competitive with comparator schools elsewhere, making Canada an affordable alternative of comparable quality to the U.S. or U.K. (Madgett & Bélanger, 2008). Perhaps most importantly, Canada's immigration rules are significantly more flexible than those of the U.S. (Jones, 2009). Students enrolled in postsecondary institutions are permitted to work part-time off-campus after six months. After graduation international students can work full time for up to three years and – if they choose – be fast-tracked to permanent residency. These factors markedly differentiate the Canadian experience of international recruitment from its peers and make Canada an interesting site for this study.

In this chapter I have reviewed scholarly literature on globalization, international recruitment, student migration, and Canadian postsecondary education. Globalization and the economic, political, and cultural forces attributed to it compel adaptive responses from citizens, organizations, institutions, and governments. Failure to respond risks both forfeiting the (purported or actual) benefits delivered by globalization, and being considered irrelevant and

dated in a fast-evolving global society. Postsecondary education and its various stakeholders experience and respond to this pressure in varying ways. For international students (and their families), it stimulates an interest in postsecondary opportunities abroad. This demand is fueled both by constrained resources at home (arguably an indirect outcome of globalization) and a desire to attain greater wealth and status through an overseas credential. This may express itself in a desire to migrate; something that destination countries like Canada facing labor shortages encourage by fast-tracking work and residency permits for international graduates. Each stakeholder in the institution-government-student triangle is pursuing an objective other than simply conferral of the credential itself. Governments seek a source of skilled migrants. Institutions pursue both enriched educational outcomes and increased revenue at a time of scarcity. Students value both the prestige of an overseas credential and the possibility of expedited migration for them and their families.

Agents enter as middlemen in these transactions. At best, they introduce students and their families to high quality institutions with low name recognition and expedite a complex admissions and visa process (Overland, 2008). At worst, they are bad actors, misrepresenting one party to another, acting in bad faith, or colluding with applicants to misuse the admissions and/or student visa pathway. To some, they are vital cross-cultural intermediaries, helping students and families find their way to satisfactory search outcomes that meet their needs. To others, they prey on their clients' lack of familiarity with the other stakeholders and subvert a process that places the highest value on safeguarding student welfare. Since institutions use agents as both a cost and time saving recruitment strategy and to compensate for a lack of familiarity with the sending country, administrators may be unaware of their agent's actions or the degree to which what students and parents need and expect differ from that of their domestic counterparts.

At the heart of this is the question of what role students play in the agent-mediated search process. Even as North American standards of practice and student choice scholars position students as the primary actors and decision makers, research on the postsecondary search in sending countries hints at a very different experience for many international students. While many reference groups and influencing factors are common to both domestic and international applicants, there appear to be significant differences in how international students and families approach the search process, their respective roles, who makes decisions, using what criteria, informed by what kinds of information. Little is known about how students and their parents work with agents, who the agent's primary client is, what role the agent plays in decision making, and the extent to which the student's individual goals and interests are considered. Given the degree to which North American admissions practices and policies centralize student agency, they may be unresponsive and unhelpful to students and families from cultural orientations that assign the student a very different role.

Theoretical Framework

In this section I describe the components of the conceptual framework that informed this study: cultural orientation; how and when reference groups influence decision-making in the postsecondary search process; and the possibility that students are not the primary actors. I also provide a graphic depiction of this framework (Figure 1, below), both to illustrate the components and how they relate to the stage model of college choice (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987).

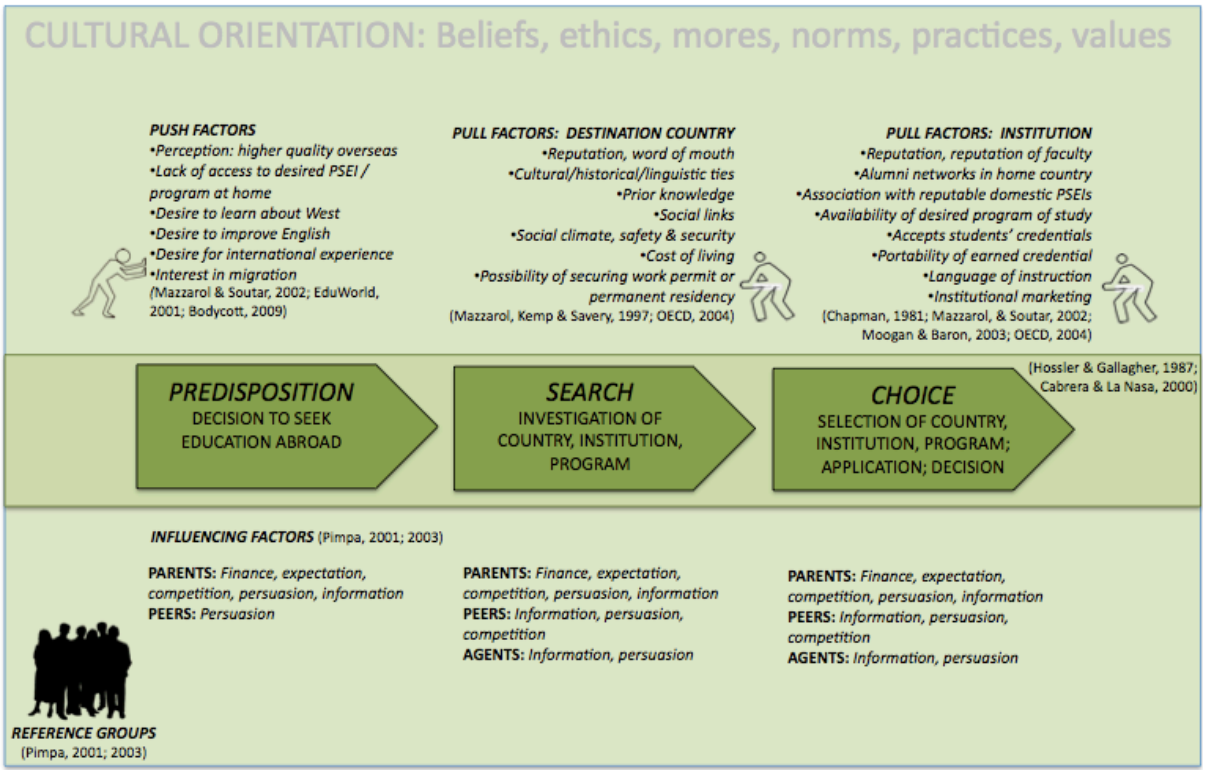

Figure 1 Original Conceptual Framework

Cultural orientation as a critical context. As I have said elsewhere, significant evidence exists that a student's social identity (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status) has an impact on the college choice process (Freeman, 1999; Hurtado, Inkalas, Briggs & Rhee, 1997; Perna, 2000; Shank & Beasley, 1998; Stage & Hossler, 1989), but less is known about student choice outside of the U.S. context (Lee, 2008). I assumed that a student's *cultural orientation* (e.g., norms associated with a student's cultural background, nationality, ethnic group or other salient cultural social identity) is a critical context for their postsecondary search (Bodycott, 2009; Bodycott & Lai, 2012). Moreover, significant differences from country to country and culture to culture make efforts to generalize or make conjectures about "international students' experience" of limited use (Choudaha, Orosz & Chang, 2012). More specifically, a student's cultural orientation may be a factor in influencing their interest in seeking education abroad and what destination countries they consider (Mazzarol & Soutar,

2002); how decisions driving the search are made and who makes them (Bodycott, 2009); and if, how, when, and why they choose to use an agent (Bhati & Anderson, 2012; Deupree, 2011). While postsecondary institutions engaged in international recruitment activities are undoubtedly aware that cultural differences exist, using agents as proxies may leave administrators unaware of exactly how this decision-making process works in the various countries in which they recruit. As such, when interviewing students I was attentive to information that suggests institutional recruitment practice may not account for differences in student cultural orientation.

Reference groups exercise influence at different time points. The student choice and student migration literature has established that different *reference groups* (e.g., parents and family members; teachers and counselors; peers, agents) can influence decision making in the postsecondary process (Ceja, 2006; Chapman, 1981; Flint, 1992; Pimpa, 2001; Stage & Hossler, 1989). Depending on the reference group, this influence may be stronger or weaker in relation to the others (Pimpa, 2001; 2003) and may vary depending on the particular time point. Peers may have more of an influence on a students' decision to seek education abroad while parents or extended family members may have more influence over institution selection (Bodycott, 2009; Pimpa (2001; 2003; 2005; 2008). Similarly, while agents may play no role in persuading a student to seek education abroad, they may exercise significant influence in the selection of a destination country, institution, or program of study (Bhati & Anderson, 2012). Since the proposed study involves an exploration of the role student choice plays in agent-assisted searches, it will be important to be mindful that a successful international postsecondary search will have lots of different fingerprints all over it. In my interviews with international students, I will attend to the ways in which agents in particular exercise influence.

Students may not be the primary choice makers and their needs and preferences may not come first. As I have said elsewhere, globalization stimulates both student migration abroad and the efforts of governments and institutions to influence the trajectory of this flow (Altbach, 2002; Altbach & Knight, 2007; Ellingboe, 1998; Knight, 2007; Marginson, 2009; Room, 2000). These intercultural connections inevitably produce friction (Tsing, 2005) – a tension between global and local, or, more accurately, between two (or more) different "locals": different understandings, different knowledges, and different expectations. Misunderstandings arise when people assume their understandings, values, and assumptions are universal. This may be the case with regard to the role students outside North America play in an international postsecondary search. North American professional norms and the student choice literature position students as the actors, the decision makers, and the primary beneficiaries in the postsecondary search. In turn, admissions representatives have an ethical obligation to ensure that students are not exploited and that they receive the information and guidance needed for them to make an informed choice (Fiske, 1981; NAFSA, 2009; NACAC, 2012; Norris, 2005).

But what if parents are the ones making the decision, not students, and *their* preferences and interests drive decision-making (Bodycott, 2009; Bodycott & Lai, 2012)? What does it mean if families are more interested in and motivated by the ease with which students can obtain permanent residency (Baas, 2006; Carletti & Davison, 2012; Maslen, 2011) than they are in the faculty-student ratio or extracurricular offerings? What if the status an earned overseas credential would confer at home matters more than the opportunity for intellectual and personal growth? So much so that it merited submitting falsified grade reports, personal statements, and English proficiency scores (Bartlett & Fischer, 2011). Further, many international families' reasons for seeking education abroad contradict the narrative of life-changing personal and

intellectual development that (middle and upper class) North Americans (and Americans particularly) attribute to college. This may explain the growing ubiquity of agents: as intermediaries that translate the interests and objectives of international students and parents for an admissions process that is not set up to respond to them. In attempting to better understand the role student choice plays in agent-mediated postsecondary searches, I assumed that students might not be central to the process in the way that their North American counterparts are. Further, I was attentive to the ways in which the needs, aspirations, and objectives students are attempting to satisfy by seeking education abroad are not accounted for in the student choice literature and in current admissions and recruitment practice.

Chapter Three: Method

Introduction

The proposed study sought to examine the experiences of international students involved in an agent-assisted Canadian postsecondary search process. Specifically,

a. What do students consider to be the affordances and limitations of agent involvement?
b. From the student's perspective, what does the process of postsecondary placement via an agent involve?
c. From the student's perspective, what role does student choice play in this process?
d. From the student's perspective, are agents responsive to student choice?
e. To what extent do students perceive that the institutions selected is a good fit?
f. How satisfied are students with the search outcome?

I conducted a qualitative, semi-structured (Glesne, 2011) interview study into the experiences of international students currently enrolled in Canadian postsecondary institutions who used education agents as part of their search strategy. Many scholars have argued that qualitative research methods are well suited to research studies involving postsecondary students (Patton, 1991; Stage & Manning, 2003; Whitt, 1991). A qualitative approach obliges the researcher to "study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3).

I used an *interpretivist* paradigm to frame my methodological approach. Scholars working within this paradigm understand their role to involve "accessing others' interpretations of some social phenomenon and of interpreting…[their subjects'] actions and intentions" (Glesne, 2011, p. 8). Noting that interpretivist research is often grounded in the assumption that

"reality is socially constructed, complex, and ever changing," Glesne (2011) concludes that its objective is to contribute to an understanding of "how people interpret and make meaning of [the social phenomenon under study]" (p. 8). Since individuals co-construct this reality with others within society at large, learning about the experiences of several individuals from a particular group reveals "something about cultural patterns of thought and action for that group" (p. 8).

I am not a member of the population (international students) that I studied. I am also not Canadian. While this means my research participants and I were both "international" in the Canadian context, cultural and linguistic similarities between the U.S. and Canada nevertheless positioned me as an "outsider" (Eliott, 1988) in relation to study participants. While I had no formal position power in the institutions these students attend, Kendall (2009; as cited in Glesne, 2001) cautions researchers to remember "we are most likely to abuse our power when we least feel we have it" (p. 148). As such, it was important for me to attend to the power (and thus the responsibility) I have as a researcher. For example, a respondent might disclose that they received assistance from an agent in submitting falsified grade reports or test scores. In order to better understand how students work with agents, I had to be sure to vigorously protect participants' confidentiality. For this reason it was important to keep confidential the identities of the institutions I selected as sites for data gathering. I describe the steps I took to protect the confidentiality of interview subjects and institutions in the following section.

Design

I used a primarily purposive (Glesne, 2011) strategy to recruit prospective study participants. I chose to limit the geographic range of my study to a nearby province that coincidentally is one of the top destinations within Canada for international students. This proximity made it easier for me to travel back and forth to conduct interviews. I decided to

further focus my efforts on two specific metropolitan regions. One enjoys high name recognition abroad, while the other would likely be unfamiliar to most international students and their families. I did this hoping to capture differences in the role that agents play with regard to how familiar their clients are with the regions and schools they recommend.

Intended design. Initially, I identified a range of potential institutions from which I hoped to recruit participants. As agent use by Canadian PSEIs often varies by institutional type (Coffey & Perry, 2014), I hoped for maximum variability with regard to the schools respondents attended. Furthermore, I chose two geographic regions as target areas. One is a rather well known metropolitan region that is home to several PSEIs, including one elite, highly ranked university. The other is a hinterland region in the same province with a much fewer number of postsecondary institutions. In my proposal I identified and described three different tiers of Canadian postsecondary institution. *Urban elite institutions* are generally ranked in the "super-league" tier (McLean, 2011) and are located in globally prominent metropolitan areas. *Urban regional institutions* are similarly located in regions with high name recognition, but are themselves less known or unknown internationally. *Hinterland institutions* are institutions that have little name recognition abroad and are situated in regions of Canada that are often equally unfamiliar to international students and their families. I hoped that including respondents from institutions from each of these categories would have allowed me to capture differences in the role that agents play, depending on how familiar or unfamiliar their clients are with the destination country and institution(s) they recommend.

A policy internship in Winnipeg (2011), pilot study in western Canada (2012), and attendance at a Canadian PSE conference (2013) allowed me to develop a network of administrators at PSEIs. Initially, I hoped to leverage this network—potential "gatekeepers"

(Farber, 2006)—to help identify prospective respondents. Following IRB approval in May 2013, I contacted administrators at several Canadian postsecondary institutions in the targeted regions. I explained the nature of my research and asked for their help in advertising the study to prospective respondents. In accordance with my proposal to the IRB, I created a flier (Appendix A) that explained the study and provided my contact information. I sent my contacts copies of this flier, asking that they be distributed to interested students. In order to protect students' confidentially, I asked that administrators not directly provide me with student names and contact information. Rather, they could invite students to email me with questions or register to participate using an online form. Throughout spring and summer of 2013, I also posted fliers announcing the study in and around several campuses.

Actual design. The difficulty I encountered in recruiting participants significantly shaped the contours of the study. While I hoped to recruit equal numbers of students from the institutional categories I had identified, I encountered disproportionate responses across the three categories. Only one respondent came from an urban elite institution. Eight students were enrolled at urban regional institutions. Fifteen attend the same hinterland institution. This means that student perspectives from institutions in the metropolitan region are somewhat underrepresented. While the sample did not meet my initial objectives in designing the study, as interviews progressed I concluded that I was gathering a range of student perspectives across different institutional types.

Characteristics of Institutions Involved

These 23 individuals were all currently enrolled in one of seven Canadian postsecondary institutions at the time they were interviewed. The PSEIs involved are fairly representative of institutional diversity in the Canadian postsecondary sector. In an effort to protect respondents'

confidentiality, I assigned a pseudonym to each PSEI. Four of the seven are publicly funded colleges (akin to community colleges in the U.S.) offering applied and technical programs that generally lead to a certificate or diploma (akin to an associate's degree). One college (Ford) is a private, for-profit college that offers an array of programs of study similar to its public counterparts. Most study participants (thirteen of 37) attend Grant Lawrence University (GLU), a comprehensive public research university located in the hinterland target region. Only one respondent attends Langside University. Langside is an elite, highly ranked university in the metropolitan target region. A full list of institutions involved in the study (Table 1) can be found below.

Institution	Tier	Affiliation	# of Participants
Chang College	Urban regional	Public	1*
Everitt-Rollins College	Urban regional	Public	3*
Ford College	Urban regional	Private	2
Grant Lawrence University	Hinterland	Public	15
Langside University	Urban elite	Public	1
Metcalfe College	Urban regional	Public	1
Stites College	Urban regional	Public	1

* *One participant transferred from Everitt-Rollins to Chang prior to degree completion.*

Table 1 Institutions Study Participants Attend

Participants

In this section I describe the criteria for participation on the study, provide additional information with regard to recruitment, and explain how I evaluated prospective respondents.

Criteria. To be eligible to participate, each student had to satisfy the following criteria:

1. 18 years of age or older;
2. Enrolled full time at a college or university in one of the two target regions;
3. Status as non-Canadian citizen or permanent resident;
4. Use of an agent to assist with the postsecondary search process to come to Canada

Recruitment. During the 2012 pilot study, I struggled to recruit administrator and student participants. In the end, I did not reach the target number that I had hoped to interview. Summer, as it turns out, is not an optimal time to reach out to PSE administrators and students. Many administrators whose responsibilities made them likely participants were away from campus when I was there. I also underestimated how my research interests might make administrators reluctant to assist. Recruitment strategies in a competitive environment are a sensitive topic and administrators may have seen no benefit in talking to me. These same factors may have contributed to my inability to secure referrals from my professional network. While network members were initially helpful and responsive, their roles did not afford access to international students and services. Next steps usually involved forwarding my email query to colleagues working more directly with international students. These secondary network members sometimes agreed to help, but then never produced any leads, even after I had followed up. In one instance, a unit supervisor intervened, explaining that they could not assist me unless I applied for and received approval from their institutional human subjects review process. I did as they asked and received approval. Even still, this did not produce any leads.

I was somewhat more successful with the fliers I had posted. I augmented these efforts with postings on social media sites like Facebook. Finally, a Canadian colleague suggested I use a Canadian website called Kijiji, on which users can post classified advertisements at no charge. I created and posted announcements advertising the study on the Kijiji sites for the two target regions. This strategy was more effective than the fliers were at eliciting contacts from prospective respondents. Word of mouth referrals by respondents to peers who also fit the study criteria also helped. I continued recruitment efforts through the autumn of 2013, curtailing them in mid-November. Of the 37 individuals who contacted me, 23 ultimately met the study criteria.

Evaluating prospective participants. All contacts from prospective respondents came via email or through an online registration form. Once contacted, I replied via email. My objective in these exchanges were:

1. To ascertain whether they met all study criteria;
2. To answer any questions and/or provide additional information;
3. To forward a copy of the Participant Information Form and Informed Consent Form (Appendix B) for their review and completion;
4. To inform them that respondents receive C$10 for a first interview and C$15 for a second interview.

Once they confirmed interest in participating, I arranged a time for us to meet at a location convenient to the participants' home, school, or work.

Data Collection

During the summer and autumn of 2013, I interviewed study participants at several colleges and universities in both target regions. I kept online field notes and created a spreadsheet to help me keep track of prospective and current participants. I used these notes as a reminder to follow-up with prospectives and to record when a set of interviews had been completed. My final interview took place on 27 November 2013.

The interview. Before beginning each interview, I reviewed the Participant Information Form and Informed Consent Form (Appendix B), asking if the respondent had questions or concerns. I had each participant sign two copies, keeping one copy for themselves. Once I had answered any remaining questions and the participant had signed the consent form, I began the first interview. Each interview generally lasted from 30-55 minutes. English proficiency was often a predictor with regard to interview length. Participants who were fluent in English with

expansive vocabularies often provided detailed, nuanced answers to interview questions, while participants whose English was more limited tended to give shorter answers. I used a series of semi-structured and open-ended questions (Appendix C) to guide the interview. With the participant's permission, I digitally recorded each interview. I gave participants the option of completing both first and second interviews consecutively. At the end of each interview, I invited participants to contact me if they had any additional questions or thoughts about our conversation.

Data Analysis

I transcribed all interviews myself, as both a cost-savings measure and to better familiarize myself with the data. I used an online program called Transcribe (https://transcribe.wreally.com/), which allowed me to use my keyboard to advance, pause, speed up, and slow down the recording as I typed. I completed transcribing all 23 interviews on 26 January of 2014. As I hoped, transcribing my own interviews helped me to become quite conversant with the data and it made it easier for me to identify potential themes. Once I had completed transcribing I began coding the data. I used a web-based data analysis program called Dedoose (www.dedoose.com). I first created a preliminary codebook, using it to code the data line by line. Codes reflected both the central research questions as well as the chronological flow of the interview, which asked participants to reflect on each stage of the search process. After coding several transcripts I stopped to review and re-organize the codebook to better capture themes and sub-themes as they emerged. Once coding was complete, I reproduced the codebook in spreadsheet form, noting the frequency with which I had assigned each code and subcode. Where appropriate, I collapsed several codes and/or subcodes into broader codes. While the coding process had already revealed several key themes, the process of transferring the results to

a spreadsheet lent additional clarity and insight to my preliminary conclusions.

Trustworthiness

Rossman and Rallis (2012) have proposed three standards for determining trustworthiness in qualitative research: "First, was the study conducted according to norms for acceptable and competent research practice? Second, was the study conducted in ways that honor participants—was it conducted ethically? Third, was the researcher sensitive to the politics of the topic and setting?" (p. 60). In collecting and analyzing data, I consistently kept to best practices for qualitative research studies. I worked slowly and methodically to transcribe interviews to ensure I accurately captured what respondents had said. Hollway and Jefferson (2000; as cited in Glesne, 2011) have identified four questions that help researchers to assess the trustworthiness of their interpretations: "*What do you notice? Why do you notice? How can you interpret what you notice? How can you know that your interpretation is the right one?"* (p. 210). Mindful of these questions, I read and re-read interview transcripts (Glesne, 2011) while coding and identifying themes. I asked peers and my advisor to review drafts as a way of further buttressing the study's credibility. I also reviewed the codebook and my analyses with my advisor. With regard to research ethics, I consistently attended to respondents' confidentiality. I assigned each participant an identification number and used this number to label interview recordings and transcripts. In this document, I have replaced participants' names with pseudonyms that they or I chose. I also assigned pseudonyms to their institutions and the agencies they used to reduce the likelihood of participants being recognized by the reader. (Readers familiar with my academic and career path may recognize the names of residence halls I've lived in or supervised, or the names of past mentors.)

Proficiency in English varied significantly among respondents. In some cases, students

had only a basic command of the language, and their responses to questions frequently did not conform to standards of grammar, sentence structure, and syntax. As precisely transcripted quotes would be very difficult for the reader, I have smoothed quotes out to make them more readable, all while being very careful to remain true to what they said. This includes editing out incorrect grammar and verb tenses. I have also removed common fillers like “um” and “uh”, again to make the quotes more easily readable.

In this chapter, I provided information as to the sample, including information on how I identified, recruited, and evaluated prospective participants. I also described how I collected, transcribed, coded, and analyzed the data gathered from interviews with respondents. I completed this discussion by discussing the measures of trustworthiness that I used and the steps I took to ensure that my actions and decisions aligned with these measures. In Chapter Four, I provide more information about the sample and present the study’s primary findings.

Chapter Four: Findings

Introduction

In this study I explored the experiences of 23 international students who hired an education agent to help them select and apply to colleges and universities in Canada. Before introducing the primary findings, I provide a brief overview of the study sample. This overview includes demographic and academic information on each participant, details on the colleges and universities they attend, and descriptions of the communities in which they live. This information provides a useful context for understanding participants' perceptions of and experiences with the postsecondary search process. Following this, I identify and discuss five themes that emerged through interviews with study participants. Collectively, these themes follow a chronological arc from predisposition, through selection of destination country and institution, to arrival and matriculation. This arc aligns with the theoretical framework I introduced in Chapter Two. As expressed through discussion of these five themes, the study's findings contribute to better understanding of the role student choice plays in the agent-assisted postsecondary search process.

Sample

Twenty-three international students – both graduate and undergraduate – from seven Canadian postsecondary educational institutions (PSEIs) agreed to participate in this study. The 23 participants in this study were diverse in some ways and not in others. Chinese (8), Indian (8), and Pakistani (5) students together comprised 91% of the total study population. This is hardly surprising. China is the top sending country to Canada, India third, and Pakistan ninth (UNESCO, 2014). I was fortunate to have had the chance to interview students from Africa and the Caribbean as well, as it is less common to hear about their experiences of students from these

regions when agent use is discussed in the education media. Gender representation in the study pool was also fairly evenly split with males (13) slightly more numerous than females (10). Students from one institution—Grant Lawrence University—predominated in the study pool, accounting for 65% of the total sample. Further, 15 of 23 students (65%) were enrolled in graduate level programs of study (master's degrees and graduate certificates), with 8 enrolled in undergraduate level programs of study (diplomas, bachelor's degrees). The dominance of graduate students was unexpected and suggests that agent use by rising graduate students may be more common than what is represented in the current literature. Lastly, the average age of respondents in the study pool is 25.6 years of age. International students in Canada tend to be older than their domestic counterparts (Statistics Canada, 2010). A report prepared for the Canadian Bureau of International Education found the average age of international students attending university to be 25, with college students slightly younger at 24 (Prairie Research Associates, 2009).

Participant Biographies

Here I provide basic biographical information about each respondent, including: (a) country of origin; (b) educational history; (c) personal (non-academic) information; and (d) the Canadian PSEI the participant attends. Table 5.1 provides an overview of the participants in the study, including information on age and gender.

Name	Age	Country	Gender	Institution	Program of Study
Aarav	21	India	M	Grant Lawrence U	Master's, Engineering
Aditya	24	India	M	Grant Lawrence U	Master's, Engineering
Amina	20	Pakistan	F	Grant Lawrence U	Bachelor's, Psychology
Arjun	22	India	M	Grant Lawrence U	Master's, Engineering
Chao	23	China	M	Grant Lawrence U	Master's Engineering
Jack	24	India	M	Grant Lawrence U	Master's, Management
Khalid	25	Pakistan	M	Grant Lawrence U	Master's, Engineering
Li Na	22	China	F	Grant Lawrence U	Master's, Accounting
Li Xia	22	China	F	Grant Lawrence U	Master's, Accounting
Li Qiang	27	China	M	Langside U	Master's, Education
Li Wei	28	China	M	Grant Lawrence U	Master's, Economics
Malik	27	India	M	Everitt-Rollins C	Graduate Certificate, International Business Management
Murad	27	India	M	Grant Lawrence U	Master's, Engineering
Omolara	19	Nigeria	F	Everitt-Rollins C	Diploma, International Business
Rahman	37	Pakistan	M	Ford C	Diploma, Business Administration
Subhash	24	India	M	Metcalfe C	Graduate Certificate, International Business Management
Susan	33	Pakistan	F	Ford C	Diploma, Payroll Management
Tashelle	31	Jamaica	F	Everitt-Rollins C/Chang C	Graduate Certificate, Health Promotion
Vivaan	28	India	M	Grant Lawrence U.	Master's Engineering
Yasmin	25	Pakistan	F	Grant Lawrence U	Master's, Engineering
Ying	29	China	F	Stites C	Diploma, Culinary Management
Zhang Min	23	China	F	Grant Lawrence U	Master's, Accounting
Zhang Xiu Ying	25	China	F	Grant Lawrence U	Master's, Accounting

Table 2 Study Participants

Aarav. Aarav came from a small town in Gujarat, which he assured me was "the best part of India." He completed a bachelor's degree in electrical engineering, albeit with some academic difficulties. Aarav's father worked as an agricultural scientist, and encouraged him to go as far as he could with his studies. Aarav's poor to middling grades threatened to keep him

from being admitted to a graduate program and many of the agents he consulted urged him to apply to colleges instead. He persisted and finally got admission to a master's program in engineering at Grant Lawrence University with an agent's help.

Aditya. Aditya didn't consider himself to be very responsible or career-oriented. "My family is always telling me that I need to focus more on my career. They'd say, 'Look at your cousins and how they've progressed in life. You need to do the same." Nevertheless he managed to complete a bachelor's in civil engineering in his home state in northwestern India. In choosing to go abroad, Aditya hoped for a personal and academic experience that he couldn't have had if he'd stayed home. Specifically, he hoped to demonstrate to himself and his family that he was capable of succeeding on his own. Although the agents he initially met were more interested in sending him to college, Aditya eventually found an agency willing to help him to apply to university. With their assistance, Aditya was admitted to a master's program in environmental engineering at Grant Lawrence.

Amina. Originally from Pakistan, Amina is pursuing a bachelor's in psychology at Grant Lawrence. "I've changed my major four times. I'm very artistic. I'm very creative. I love things related to fashion. I would love to do fashion designing in the future. And I'm very good at makeup. You can see that!" Amina was well traveled, having visited the U.S. and Europe prior to starting school in Canada. As Pakistan's security situation deteriorated, her parents resolved to send her out of the country for school. Amina dreamed of going to university in London, but her father insisted she come to Canada where her brother lived. Amina's agent is an extended family member. This makes her experience with using an agent somewhat of an outlier in the study, even as she confronted many of the same issues other respondents did. Ultimately Amina enrolled in the same university as her brother.

Arjun. Arjun is a studious graduate student from south India studying for a master's in engineering. He described himself as coming from a "serious academic family". Both his father and one brother were professors back in India, another brother practiced medicine in the U.S., while his sister in law had earned a master's degree in commerce. Like many other respondents, Arjun had friends who had gone abroad to Australia, Canada, and the U.S. for graduate studies, and their experience stimulated his interest in following in their footsteps. Initially he hoped to come to the U.S. He applied and was admitted to three U.S. universities, but his visa application was denied. His interests shifted to Canada and he applied and was speedily admitted to Grant Lawrence University with an agent's assistance.

Chao. Chao is a soft-spoken master's student from China. After completing an undergraduate degree at what he described as a "top tier university in south China", he decided to look abroad for graduate programs in engineering. Many of his classmates had already gone overseas or were planning to apply to institutions in the U.S., Australia, and Europe. Australia held no appeal for Chao, as he considered it too touristy. He thought the U.K. was too expensive, and the U.S. application and visa processes too challenging, which led him to Canada. Chao mentioned his mother as the greatest influence on his search process. He described how she took the lead in identifying an agent and negotiating the contract. The agent helped Chao apply to several universities, but in the end he only received one admissions offer. This outcome clearly embarrassed him. After some soul-searching and talking with his mother, he accepted the offer—from Grant Lawrence.

Jack. Jack is a master's student in management at Grant Lawrence. Born into a fairly affluent and tightly knit family in Gujarat (India), Jack earned a bachelor's in engineering before going to work for his family's business. "My father likes my business sense," he explained. "He

thinks I make good decisions at the right time." Jack was initially very attracted to the U.S., but his attention shifted to Canada once he learned how quickly he could secure PR after graduation. Like Subhash, a primary motivation for Jack to study in Canada was the opportunity to help grow his family's business. "If I become a permanent resident I can access the entire U.S. market, and Latin America as well. It's like getting all of the Americas in one dish!" Like Aarav and Aditya, Jack cycled through several agents before finding one willing and able to help him apply to graduate programs in Canada.

Khalid. Khalid's father and his two brothers are all engineers, but he is the first in his family to pursue graduate study. His family and professors all encouraged him to consider going abroad for a master's, but a cousin pursuing a Ph.D. provided the greatest influence. "He said that North American universities can give you a diverse view of the world, not just in your field but in life as well, as you can meet people from all over the world." Friends from home already studying in Canada provided additional support and encouragement, and their stories helped shift an initial focus on the U.S. to Canada. Canada's use of English and the presence of vibrant Muslim and Pakistani communities were also important factors. "I've been speaking English since I was very young, so it comes naturally to me. Some of my friends went to Germany and Korea and struggled with the language barrier." An ad in his local newspaper led him to his agent and an appointment with a visiting faculty member from Grant Lawrence University. He applied and was accepted to GLU's master's program in engineering.

Li Na. Li Na is an outgoing and friendly master's student in accounting from Xi'an, in China. She described her family as hardworking and independent. Both her parents held professional positions. Her mother was an accountant while her father worked as an engineer. She also mentioned one sibling – a brother – unusual in a study in which Chinese respondents

frequently mentioned the government's one-child policy as a factor motivating parents to help their children go abroad. Li Na said her family had also sacrificed to send her to Canada. "I'm very grateful that they gave me this opportunity, because it cost them a lot in China." Li Na had studied at a foreign languages university in Xi'an for her bachelor's degree, which helped explain her ease and fluency in using English. Li Na was interested in migration, which catalyzed her interest in Canada. She confessed to not being terribly ambitious. She was wary of hypercompetitive elite universities, but she didn't want to end up at an inferior school either. In the end, her agent helped her to gain admission to a university she considered just right—Grant Lawrence University.

Li Xia. Li Xia came to Grant Lawrence University from a city in north China. The only child in her family, her parents worried that she would struggle on her own. Li Xia hoped that a master's degree in accounting from a respected overseas university would give her an edge in the job market back home. "It's become more and more difficult to find a suitable job, and the standards are very high." She named her mother as a primary influence on her decision to go abroad. "Some of her colleagues' children have found good jobs after studying abroad," Li Xia recalled. Like Li Na, Li Xia was also interested in opportunities for immigration. She initially considered Australia and the U.K. as well, but after talking with her parents, she concluded that Canada was the best option for her.

Li Qiang. Some elements of Li Qiang's story make him an outlier in this study. He completed a bachelor's degree at one of China's most elite universities. After graduation and two years working in Shanghai, Li Qiang hired an agent to help him apply to graduate schools abroad. "I've always wanted to go to one of the top universities in the world," he recalled. His agent helped him apply to seven universities—by far the most number of any respondent.

Included in that list were some of Canada's most elite institutions, which do not pay agent commissions as a matter of policy. As such, Li Qiang was one of only two respondents whose agents' recommendations were not commission-driven. Li Qiang received an offer of admission from Langside, a well-known, highly ranked Canadian university. He is the only respondent from Langside.

Li Wei. Li Wei came to Grant Lawrence from Guangzhou. Like Li Qiang, he earned a bachelor's degree in Shanghai and then stayed on to work for two years. Li Wei was one of only a few respondents to cite his colleagues and supervisor as a primary reference group. "They said if you want to process, or move to a bigger company, you need to get an education outside China," he recalled. Li Wei wanted to study in an environment that was safe (so that his parents wouldn't worry) and where English is spoken (so that he could practice). He hired an agent as a timesaving strategy—a factor frequently mentioned by other respondents. With the agent's help, Li Wei applied to three universities. He ultimately chose Grant Lawrence, where he is pursuing a master's in economics.

Malik. Like Li Wei, Malik also named his colleagues and supervisor as important influencers on his decision to go abroad. After completing his bachelor's degree in mass communication, Malik found work at a multinational company in India that managed background check processes for other companies. Some members of the senior management suggested to him that he would be better positioned for advancement with additional educational credentials and international experience. Malik hoped to find somewhere with a temperate climate. He initially focused on the U.S. until his agent told him that many Indian students' visa applications were being rejected. On his agent's advice, he applied to a graduate certificate program in global business management at Everitt-Rollins College. "If I was going to do a

master's, I would've done it in my own country. As an international student, I would have paid a really high premium to study in Canada." This conviction didn't last. As his graduation approached, Malik concluded that a master's degree might have been a better choice after all.

Murad. After earning a bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering, Murad had gone to work for an automobile company in India. He was very close with his family, so much so that he credited his mother's willingness to let him move away as a primary factor in his decision to study abroad. Murad initially applied only to graduate programs in the U.S. "I would've applied to Canada at the same time, but some people told me it's very difficult to get into Canadian universities." Other Indian and Pakistani respondents reported hearing the same thing from their agents. It is a common strategy agents use to divert their clients' interests from universities to colleges. When his U.S. visa application was denied, Murad's attention shifted to Canada. He did some research online and found that the program he wanted was offered at a handful of Canadian universities, including Grant Lawrence University. He contacted GLU directly to apply, but was told he was required to work through a designated agency in India. He contacted the agent they recommended, who duly managed his application and visa process. He was admitted to GLU, where he is completing a master's in engineering.

Omolara. Omolara, 19, is both the youngest and the only Nigerian participant in the study. "I'm competitive and friendly. I love meeting people and discovering new things. And I love challenges!" Assuming she would never secure permission from her father to go abroad, Omolara expected to attend university at home. When her cousin announced her intention to go to Canada for school, her aunt interceded, her father relented, and Omolara found herself planning to go abroad. Omolara was a big believer in serendipity. "I believe that anything that happens is part of my destiny," she explained. She had never expected to leave Nigeria, so any

destination, any college, and any school was fine with her. “Anywhere I go, or what happens when I’m there is what is meant to happen.” Her cousin’s mother and their agent made most of the decisions in Omolara’s search process. They chose Canada over the U.S., even though Omolara considered Canada “boring.” The agent Omolara’s relative hired only represented Everitt-Rollins College, so that’s where Omolara applied even though they did not offer the courses she wanted. Any regrets about her search outcome were swamped by enthusiasm for her new life in Canada. She continues to recommend her agent to others back home.

Rahman. At 37, Rahman is the oldest student in the study and one half of a married pair. His wife Susan also participated. They are also the only married students in the study. Both students’ interviews took place in a busy neighborhood public library, near where they lived with their children. Both Rahman and Susan had completed graduate degrees in their home country of Pakistan. Rahman worked in the medical field while Susan taught at a local university. They found and hired an agent once they arrived in Canada—the only students in the study to do so. This agent only represented Ford College, a private career college offering diploma programs. They both enrolled – Rahman in business administration, Susan in payroll management. Both indicated that expedience drove their decision-making. They believed the credentials they were earning would allow them to quickly find jobs and earn money. They both hoped to go on to graduate school and to resume the professional careers they’d left behind in Pakistan, but that would have to wait until their finances had recovered from their move to Canada.

Subhash. Subhash described himself as both business-minded and eager for opportunity. He had already earned a bachelor’s degree in business and worked for his family’s garment business for several years before coming to Canada. In his interviews Subhash recalled his family’s interest in expanding their business beyond their home market in southern India. He

thought that studying abroad would help him acquire the knowledge, the cultural competence, and the professional networks he would need to help grow the business. Subhash already had a cousin living in Canada. “He said Canada is a good country. It invites lots of international students and there is no problem with racism.” Through an agent, Subhash applied and was admitted to Metcalfe College, where he is pursuing a graduate certificate in international business management.

Tashelle. Tashelle is the only Jamaican student in the study. A nurse by training, she had already earned a bachelor’s degree and had worked for several years in Kingston. Tashelle became interested in study abroad as a migration strategy. In fact, her initial plan was simply to move to Canada for work. She heard an agent’s advertisement on the radio, called, and made an appointment. Most of her extended family had already moved to the U.S. “I wanted to go somewhere different,” Tashelle recalled, and so told her agent she wanted to focus on Canada. It was the agent who recommended she go to school in Canada as a way to familiarize herself with the country. “He said it’s better to go into the school and understand what the country is like before you start working there,” she recalled. “If I don’t want to work here, then I can go back home.” She applied to Everitt-Rollins College with the agent’s help and was quickly admitted to a graduate certificate program in health promotion. After a year, Tashelle learned that completing a program of longer duration would qualify her for a longer work permit. She applied and transferred to Chang College, which offered a similar program. Tashelle reported that she was generally satisfied with her search’s outcome, although she regretted paying the agent’s fee and having to select from a narrow range of schools.

Vivaan. Vivaan described himself as shy and introverted, with only a few close friends. He had already completed a bachelor’s degree in mechanical engineering back home in southern

India and was working full-time when he made the decision to go abroad for graduate studies. “I thought this would be a new area for me to explore, and I will get a lot of exposure and knowledge in this field,” he recalled. “And after earning this degree I can start my own enterprise later.” Vivaan’s parents were a bit dubious at the prospect of his leaving a job to go back to school, but they ultimately supported his interest in a master’s degree. Like Murad, Vivaan initially focused on the U.S. but after his visa application was rejected, his interest shifted to Canada and Germany. With an agent’s help, he applied to several universities in both countries. Canada’s friendly immigration policies ended up as a dealmaker for Vivaan. He accepted an offer of admission from Grant Lawrence University and is currently pursuing a master’s degree in engineering.

Yasmin. Yasmin was a master’s student in engineering at Grant Lawrence University. In introducing herself, she said that her family worried that she was a bit naïve. “They say I trust people very easily. They’re afraid I’m a bit stupid.” Yasmin proved to be anything but in the course of her interviews. Her observations were frequently astute, thoughtful, and even acerbic at times. Yasmin came to Canada hoping to advance in her field. “I’ve always wanted to be a project manager. If I can get good experience in Canada, I’ll get to do international projects.” Relatives put Canada on her radar. Yasmin had relatives there who had found Canada to be a welcoming and inclusive place to live. She did some initial research on the Internet and identified which universities had the programs of study that aligned with her interests. Like Li Na, Yasmin was not drawn to apply to one of Canada’s elite institutions. “I consider myself an average student, so I looked for an average university.” She contacted Grant Lawrence to apply directly, but like Murad, she was told she had to work through a designated agent in Pakistan.

Yasmin was skeptical about the benefits of agent use. Students could save time by working with an agent, but it also left them dependent and vulnerable to being misled.

Ying. Ying was enrolled in a culinary management diploma program at Stites College, the only student from Stites in the study. Ying had earned a bachelor's degree in English back home in China and had been teaching prior to coming to Canada. Nevertheless, her agent persuaded her to apply to a vocational program, insisting it would increase her chance of admission. He assured Ying she could change programs later, but when she arrived, she learned the program she wanted was oversubscribed. While Ying was one of several respondents who had been similarly mismatched by their agent, she was the only one to pronounce herself "angry" with her agent. During interviews, Ying indicated she planned to transfer to Congreve College on the advice of a friend.

Zhang Min. Zhang Min grew up in Beijing. After graduating with a bachelor's degree from a university in the capital, she went to work. After less than a year however, she decided to return to school. "I decided I still have a lot to learn. I already had some work experience. If I can learn some new knowledge and skills, it will help me a lot." Her parents were supportive of her interest in going abroad for a graduate degree. "They think it will be good for me. After you study abroad, you'll have a lot of opportunities. You can stay in the country where you studied, or you can come back home." Zhang Min initially considered Britain, but after consulting with some agents, concluded that Canada was a better match. The programs of study for accounting in Canada were longer than in the U.K. Zhang Min felt the extra time could be helpful for her. "I need some time to adjust to life, my studies, and to English. I think a twelve month program is not enough time." She applied to three universities in Canada with an agent's help and was accepted to Grant Lawrence, where she currently attends.

Zhang Xiu Ying. Zhang Xiu Ying was born and raised in Shanghai. Her parents were supportive of her interest in going abroad for graduate study, though they worried she would struggle. “My mother thinks I’m a little introverted. I’m not much of a talker. When I meet new people, I usually get very quiet.” Zhang Xiu Ying quickly found a job after university in Shanghai, but her work life had gotten stale and she found herself wondering what was next. “I think life needs some kind of risk or adventure,” she reflected. “So I decided to study abroad.” Zhang Xiu Ying initially aspired to Langside University, but after hiring an agent (who insisted—erroneously—that the graduate program at Langside did not recruit international students) her attention shifted to Grant Lawrence University. An uncle who lived in Canada recalled visiting the GLU campus assured Zhang Xiu Ying and her parents that the school was legitimate and the campus verdant and safe. She applied and was admitted to GLU’s master’s program in accounting.

In this section I provided detailed information about the study sample, including brief biographies of each participant and a chart that displays key demographic information as well as institutional affiliation. I also made brief observations about the sample, including discussion of variability in age, gender, country of origin, institutional affiliation, and educational level. I now turn to the primary findings of the study.

Introduction to Primary Themes

I have identified five themes related to the role student choice plays in the agent-mediated postsecondary search: (1) How students construct their goal orientations, (2) Student perceptions of the affordances and limitations of agent involvement, (3) Agents as a pivotal reference group, (4) Students reality-test agent recommendations by leveraging alternative sources of information, and (5) Student satisfaction with search outcome does not rely on institutional fit. Data organized

around the theme of "how students construct their goal orientations" pertain to the process in which students organize and prioritize their personal, academic, and career goals when seeking postsecondary opportunities in Canada. The theme "student perceptions of the affordances and limitations of agent involvement" concerns the benefits and risks students associate with the decision to use an agent. "Agents as a pivotal reference group" describes how, where, and when agents enter the postsecondary process and the ways in which they exert influence on student choice making. The theme "students reality-test agent recommendations" pertains to the ways in which students use alternative information sources as a means of evaluating the accuracy and applicability of agent recommendations. Lastly, "student satisfaction with search outcome does not rely on institutional fit" explores the degree to which students tolerated a range of outcomes that often did not provide for optimal institutional fit.

Theme One: How Students Construct Their Goal Orientations

A range of reference groups and factors influence student goal construction at the *predisposition* (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987) stage of the search process. Respondents' descriptions of the reference groups they consulted most align with previous research findings regarding the influence of parents, other family members, and peers (Bodycott, 2009; Bodycott & Lai, 2012; Li, 2011; Pimpa, 2001; 2003; 2005; 2008). Student participants reported that family and friends with first-person experience were particularly influential in catalyzing interest in education abroad, advising on a destination country or region, and – in some cases—on agent selection. Respondents overwhelmingly named parents as the most influential reference group, even as the scope of their influence narrowed for graduate student participants.

Multiple push-and-pull factors (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002) influence students to seek postsecondary opportunities abroad (Cubillo, Sánchez & Cerviño, 2006; Pimpa, 2001; M. Yang,

2007; R. Yang, 2002; Wang, 2007). For international students, the decision of which education level, institution, or program of study (*academic goals*) are inextricably bound up with ascertaining which jurisdiction offers the best job opportunities in the student's field (*career goals*) or the fastest route to permanent residency (*personal goals*). In this section, I review the motivating push-and-pull factors that influence respondents' academic, career, and personal initial (or *predisposition*) goal orientations. I also identify and discuss the reference groups that respondents named as having the greatest influence on the decision to search abroad.

Push factors. Participant responses largely aligned with the push-and-pull factors described in the literature (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). "Push" factors describe circumstances in the student's home country that make remaining at home for work or study less desirable. Here, I discuss the push factors that were most salient for study participants.

Migration. Migration is both a means and an end for international students. Talk of migrating appeared early and frequently in all participant interviews. In this section, I use *migration* specifically to refer to attaining a legal status (usually permanent residency, or PR) that affords the individual the right to live and work in Canada indefinitely. As I have discussed in Chapter Two, Canada provides a glide path to PR for international students with an earned credential from a Canadian PSEI. This is a competitive strategy by the Canadian government to attract a greater share of international students and to expand the immigration stream of skilled migrants. Interview data suggest that this strategy is achieving its intended effect: Twenty-one of 23 participants indicated that they intend to apply for permanent residency in Canada after graduation (the remaining two were undecided). This aligns with previously reviewed findings that migration and resettlement is of primary importance for international students, with degree attainment as a means to that end (Baas, 2006; 2007; 2010). All twenty-three respondents cited

Canada's willingness to expedite work authorization and PR as a primary reason why they chose to study in Canada.

The desire to migrate may be both a push and pull factor. For some students, dissatisfaction with some aspect of life in their home countries provided an impetus to seek opportunity elsewhere. Others focused more on the lives they hoped to make for themselves in Canada. Regardless, respondents' stories make plain the degree to which migration drives student decision-making. This is especially true at the predisposition stage, when students select a destination country. The factors at this stage that respondents considered salient had more to do with the ease and likelihood of obtaining work authorization and PR and less with institutional and programmatic fit. When migration is the primary goal, students may be quite willing to sideline and even exclude factors associated with fit in their decision-making. This makes such students vulnerable to agent strategies that emphasize an expedited pathway to PR while leaving student academic interests unaddressed.

Khalid (Graduate student, Pakistan, GLU) suggested that selecting a school or program isn't really the point for many students: "They want to get out of the country. That's the reason people don't concern themselves with the legitimacy of an agency, or the quality of education. They think if they earn a degree here, they can get PR and settle." As he waited to talk with agents at an education fair, Khalid could hear other students' questions. "Many people are using this as a stepping stone to immigration. They're not concerned with education at all. Instead, they asked if they could take their families with them." Aditya (Graduate student, Pakistan, GLU) had the same impression. "Many people are interested in getting PR, whichever way they can. They don't care if they go to university or college. They just want to get citizenship here." He suggested that agents know about and cater to this interest. "Most agents try to convince the

majority of people that after graduating they will easily get a job and PR." Rahman (Undergraduate, Pakistan, Ford C.) recalled the questions he asked his agent. The order reveals the privileging of migration and job concerns over institutional fit. "First, I asked them about job prospects. The second thing is how long it takes to get citizenship. Third: what are the education prospects? Fourth is the probability of my application's success."

Aditya used a similar set of criteria. "Cost is the biggest thing for an international student especially coming from India. Next are the career prospects. After completing your degree, what are the chances of getting a good job to secure your future? And the main thing is getting approved for a visa and PR." Aditya initially also considered Australia, the U.K. and the U.S., but all three failed to meet his conditions. "I had selected three criteria: job, PR, and cost. In that regard, Canada did very well compared to any other countries." Yasmin's (Graduate student, Pakistan, GLU) professors warned her that Canada would be costly, but the ease with which she could obtain PR trumped those concerns. "In the long term, it's good. You get PR easily over here. Canada welcomes people, right? It's easier to get residency here, as compared with other countries."

For some students, obtaining PR is the means to still another end: providing for their parents. Families may fund a child's education abroad intending to follow them once they establish a foothold. Under such circumstances students assume responsibility to support their parents in retirement. Li Na (Graduate student, China, GLU) looked for information online about Canada's immigration policy. "I learned Canada is very open and friendly. I came here not only to study, but also to immigrate and to bring my parents here." Aarav (Graduate student, India, GLU) had a similar plan. "My goal is to get PR as soon as possible so I can bring my parents here. They're very old and I don't want them to live alone. I want to be there, either in India or

Canada." Omolara (Undergraduate student, Nigeria, Everitt-Rollins C.) understood she had obligations beyond personal success in coming to Canada. "I think my main reason for being here is to make it in life, to help my family, and to lift them up."

This obligation may be particularly acute for students whose expenses in coming to Canada absorbed most of their family's savings. Jack (Graduate student, India, GLU) came from an affluent family that was easily able to bankroll his studies, but he knew of many others who weren't as fortunate.

> I can talk about a lot of people in this situation. Some people's parents have given their life savings to help them come to Canada. Students like this feel so much pressure when they arrive. Lots of people here do cash jobs because they want to earn money so badly. They know the money their parents gave them came through hard work they've done all their lives. It's their savings. And not many people get pensions in India. The situation is so frustrating that you just want to leave India.

While only two respondents in the study (Rahman and Susan) had children, their stories suggest that young parents may also view study abroad as a chance to better provide for their families. Rahman and Susan both had earned graduate degrees and enjoyed a comfortable, prosperous life in Pakistan. Nevertheless, they aspired to leave the country in search of a better life for their children. "I want for us to explore the world," Rahman explained. "To take my family somewhere else where we can grow together."

Dissatisfaction with social conditions. Four students—all women—specifically mentioned dissatisfaction with social conditions in their home countries. Three came from Pakistan. They described a deteriorating security environment, limits on religious freedom, and reduced opportunities for women as factors catalyzing an interest in study abroad. "My family actually wanted me to leave my country," recalled Yasmin (Graduate student, Pakistan, GLU). "I'm from an Islamic country. Women don't have freedom there. Over here, you are free to wear

anything, free to talk about anything. Achieving this was my personal goal in coming to Canada." Amina's (Undergraduate student, Pakistan, GLU) father worried about his children's safety. "He always wanted us to study abroad because the political situation in Pakistan is not good. We have very good universities, but the fact is you aren't safe there. But outside the country, there is some sort of security." Susan (Undergraduate student, Pakistan, GLU) also felt unsafe at home. "The law and order situation is becoming worse day by day. There are so many kidnappings, so many assassinations. Every time you go out, you're afraid someone will gun you down. That's why I started thinking of going to some other country."

Li Na (Graduate student, China, GLU) recounted a litany of problems, from food safety and skyrocketing housing costs to pollution and traffic. It was hard for her to imagine how she would ever afford a house and a decent quality of life there. In contrast, Canada's open spaces and unspoiled environment promised the chance for a much better life.

> Food is a problem in China. Do you remember hearing about the problems with powdered milk? Or reusing dirty oil for the hot pot? Sometimes they make soy from hair and yogurt from shoes. That really shocked me. So many problems in recent years. In Canada the cars wait for me, but in China it's dangerous to cross the road. And house prices. Ten thousand dollars will only get you a bedroom, or maybe several rooms in a very high building, not a house. If someone doesn't eat or drink, if they save their salary, perhaps in ten years they can buy a small room. So I decided to come here, for a better living condition.

Dissatisfaction with PSE in home country. The perception that education abroad is of higher quality is another significant push factor for international students (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Twenty-one of 23 participants in the study had earned a PSE credential at home before coming to Canada. Their impressions came from firsthand experience, providing an unexpected opportunity to explore this push factor in more detail. Four respondents cited this experience as an important factor influencing a decision to seek PSE opportunities abroad. During interviews,

they frequently compared their experiences at home with what they were encountering as students in Canada. All four described aspects of their home countries' education systems that they didn't like and hoped to avoid by studying abroad. Jack (Graduate student, India, GLU) had earned a bachelor's degree in India.

> Indian education focuses on calculations. The business courses there didn't cover quantitative tools, and people don't really use them in their day-to-day lives. But here, my professors have taught me all the quantitative tools. When to take loans and when not to take them, all the ratios, and everything. These were the things I wanted to learn. When I go back to India, these tools will give me an edge over the other businesses I'm competing with.

Murad (Graduate student, India, GLU) also found the Indian education system lacking. "It's not flexible for students. I can't choose my courses. I have to take whatever courses are offered. There's no choice. Western countries are more liberal. They encourage research, and you have a lot of choice in what you want to study." Aditya (Graduate student, India, GLU) marveled at the organization and efficiency with which his university in Canada operated. "Whoever comes from India has never seen anything like this. Over here it's very organized. It's very systematic." Further, he appreciated the range of student support services Grant Lawrence operated. "They offer workshops to support your personal development. Back home it is not like that. You just had to study. You had to go to college, take an exam, pass it, and then you are on your own."

Li Na (Graduate student, China, GLU) appreciated the consistent quality across Canada's postsecondary system. In contrast, when Chinese universities were good, they were very, very good, but when they were bad they were horrible. "In China different schools are really different from each other. A bad school is poor—not only the teaching but also the facilities." For Zhang Min (Graduate student, China, GLU) the problem wasn't lack of quality but access. Admission

to the graduate programs that most interested her was extremely competitive. “There are only a few choices after you graduate; you find a job, continue your studies in China, or study abroad. It’s very difficult to be admitted to graduate programs in China, so I chose to study abroad.”

Pull factors. “Pull” factors represent aspects of life, work, and study in a potential destination country that the student finds desirable (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Here, I discuss the pull factors that were most salient for study participants.

To learn and excel academically. With regard to pull factors, fifteen out of 23 respondents cited learning-related goals as a motivation to study abroad. Goals respondents described that fall within this category include achieving academically (e.g., earning a high grade); content or skills acquisition and practice (e.g., improving one’s English skills; acquiring quantitative financial tools); or – more broadly—a desire for an academic experience in the destination country. The academic goals respondents described were generally simple and unelaborated: to earn a good grade or to learn something new. This contrasts with the specificity with which respondents described career or personal goals, particularly as they related to migration and resettlement. In coming to Canada, Li Xia (Graduate student, China, GLU) hoped to build on what she’d learned as an undergraduate student. “I think the accounting system in Canada is different from in China, so I think I may learn some new things here.” Aditya (Graduate student, India, GLU) expected that graduate study would test his mettle. “The basic priority for me was to prove myself. It was the only thing I thought about back home. My goal was to complete a master's and earn good grades.” Yasmin (Graduate student, Pakistan, GLU) wanted to learn about the best practices that would inform her practice as an engineer. “I wanted to learn international standards that govern how you work in my field outside my country.”

Career advancement. In contrast to their academic goals, respondents’ career goals were

invariably well developed and planful. In particular, respondents with family businesses or post-bachelor's work experience provided detailed examples of how they expected a Canadian degree to advance their careers. This emphasis on career suggests the degree to which respondents' career and personal (i.e., migration, PR) goals drive the study abroad process. Put a different way, the choice to study abroad only makes sense if the student believes the outcome advances these primary goals. Education abroad requires time and money. For students with bachelor's degrees who are already working full-time, going back to school means relinquishing a salary and benefits as well as one's place on the career ladder. These are not insignificant sacrifices and – as they do for many domestic students – they drive students' interest in ensuring a meaningful return on their investment. This concern also influences program selection. All 23 respondents chose to pursue pre-professional courses of study with a clear path to employment after graduation.

Even as Vivaan (Graduate student, India, GLU) reported that his academic goals were most important, he easily drew connections between degree completion and his career objectives. These connections were especially important given what he'd had to spend to come to Canada. "Mostly I was interested in acquiring new knowledge," he recalled. "But I had to spend a lot to obtain this knowledge, so I hope to earn a lot of money using it." At GLU, Vivaan gravitated to topics that had been unfamiliar to him back in India. Supply chain management promised a strategy for managing uncertainties in the market, something that appealed to him as a budding entrepreneur.

> You don't know how customer demand will fluctuate. Nevertheless you have to maintain supply, because when demand is there you have to meet it or your business is lost. So if I start an enterprise tomorrow, I'll need to know about this. The world changes every day. There may be demand in North America today and no demand tomorrow. There may be no demand in Europe today and lot of demand tomorrow. As time changes, demand changes as well. I think learning about this will provide an opportunity for me to gain

some knowledge and skills so that I can start a new business and grow.

Twelve respondents specifically mentioned a desire for work experience abroad, although their reasons for this varied. For some, working provided them an opportunity to help offset the costs they had incurred by coming to Canada. Others considered acquiring work experience in Canada to be just as useful as the credential itself in conferring advantage in the job market. Migration-minded students saw acquiring local work experience as a critical step towards permanent residency. Policies that permit international students to work in Canada definitely caught these students' attention. In some cases, it was the deciding factor in selecting Canada as a destination country. Malik (Graduate certificate, India, Everitt-Rollins C.) initially wanted to go to the U.K. but found his options for staying in the country after graduation were limited. "The U.K. didn't have much to offer in terms of building up practical experience after you finish your studies, while Canada was really promising in that regard." Ying (Undergraduate, China, Stites C.) also considered the U.K. and the U.S. "I had classmates that went to the U.S., but Canada offers a working visa after you study. That was a very big reason for me to come here. If the U.S. had offered that, I'd definitely have gone to America."

Engineering students often cited access to co-op programs as an attractor for a particular institution or program of study. A GLU professor working as a recruiter under the aegis of an agency promoted his school's co-op program to Vivaan (Graduate student, India, GLU). "He explained that it's a pilot program being offered by the university. If I apply to the program and I am selected, I can gain work experience, and that will be helpful." Aditya (Graduate student, India, GLU) sought work experience in Canada as an intermediate step towards starting his own business. "My goal is to secure a good job, because after getting some experience you can start your own business or your own consultancy (agency). It's better to have your own business

rather than being employed by someone else." Li Xia (Graduate student, China, GLU) hoped that post-degree work experience would confirm her interest in accounting as a long-term career. "After graduation I want to find a job as an accountant. I think I'll learn a lot from it and the experience will help me decide whether I will pursue accounting as a lifelong career."

An interest in PR and settling in Canada did not preclude respondents from also expressing an interest in obtaining a Canadian degree to better compete in the job market back home. This is not as contradictory as it may seem. Students who seek PR aren't necessarily choosing to leave their home countries forever. Rather, PR provides greater freedom of movement and enhanced access to resources and opportunities beyond what their home countries could offer. Some respondents anticipated tending to businesses and supporting and raising families in both countries. Keeping one's options open necessarily meant gauging what doors might open with a Canadian degree back home. Li Na (Graduate student, China, GLU) believed her master's degree could help her find and keep a place in China's middle class. "We have so many people in China, so labor is very low-priced. You can end up as a servant for other people for whom your salary is very cheap. Only people that work in offices can earn more." Zhang Xiu Yang (Graduate student, China, GLU) believed a Canadian degree and improved fluency in English would help her compete if she returned home.

> I think studying for this master's degree in Canada will help me improve my English. Shanghai is a center of international finance; so many companies come from all over the world to invest here. Perhaps when I get back to Shanghai, I can find a decent job, even better than the one I had before. I think it will be quite helpful for furthering my career.

Malik (Graduate certificate, India, Everitt-Rollins C.) had worked for several years after graduating with his bachelor's degree in India. "Businesses in India really honor certificates and degrees from abroad. I decided that perhaps I should add some certifications to my resume, and

international exposure would certainly help me." Li Wei (Graduate student, China, GLU) was one of a handful of respondents who planned to return home after graduating. He saw greater opportunity for himself in urban China, but knew the job market there would be intensely competitive. "A master's degree will make it easier to find a job in a bigger firm with a better chance for promotion. Of all of my colleagues who received a promotion, many of them have master's degrees."

For Jack (Graduate student, India, GLU), earning a Canadian degree implied the promise of enhanced access to overseas markets for his family's garment business.

> My brother and my father have established a good business in India, but our market is limited to our state. It isn't national in scope, and we have much less exposure to markets outside India. I suspect there might be a cultural difference; something that is not letting me connect to people outside India. Whenever a call comes from India, people don't take it seriously. But when a call comes from Europe, people take it seriously. So I wanted to make contacts. Three or four years after I get my permanent residency, or my citizenship, I would like to start a business in Canada. Once you get your Canadian citizenship, you can also start a business in the U.S. If you have an Indian passport, you can't travel to any country without a visa. But if you have a Canadian passport, then in fifty or sixty percent of the countries you can just go in and go out. So it would be very easy for me to just go into a country and meet some people. If I want to be in international trade, then it would be good for me to have a Canadian passport as compared to an Indian passport.

Exploration, challenge, and adventure. Like their North American peers, respondents also described being motivated by a sense of adventure or curiosity to travel, live, work, and study abroad. Fourteen of 23 respondents cited motivating factors related to the desire to explore, test themselves, and find adventure in an unfamiliar locale. Two responses emerged most often in student stories. First, some respondents sought the challenge of being immersed in an alien culture and learning to thrive. They saw value both in the attempt and in the qualities they might acquire in succeeding. Aditya (Graduate student, India, GLU) imagined life in Canada would test his abilities to thrive on his own, far from home and family. "The basic priority was for me to

prove myself. It was the only thing that I thought about back home, prior to coming to Canada. To me, proving yourself means to be independent." Li Qiang (Graduate student, China, Langside U.) expressed similar sentiments. "I just want to experience new people; to see whether I can survive in a new city where I know nobody. To test myself, challenge myself, and to see whether I can survive." Tashelle (Undergraduate, Jamaica, Everitt-Rollins C. / Chang C.) also imagined Canada would provide opportunities both to explore and to grow. "My goal is to become more independent and to explore what other countries are like." Zhang Xiu Yang (Graduate student, China, GLU) also anticipated and welcomed the challenge of life in a wholly unfamiliar place. "The most important factor is that Canada is a totally new environment for me. It's the biggest challenge and the biggest change in my lifetime. I think that life needs some risk or adventure, so I decided to study abroad."

Secondly, respondents also saw value in the opportunity for cultural exploration in a multicultural and open society. Many had grown up in racially homogeneous societies, or in places where the intolerance of difference contributed to ongoing unrest and violence. In contrast, Canada's reputation for openness and diversity held great appeal. Chao (Graduate student, China, GLU) described his plan to acclimate to his multicultural campus and community.

> Since you are in a foreign country, you need to get yourself adapted to this environment. You need to make lots of foreign friends and you need to get used to living in this place. It's one of my goals. I also want to learn something beside what I'm learning in my classes. I know Canada is a very multicultural place. So I need to…I also want to learn some foreign languages besides English. I'm working on it now. I wish to make myself a person with a multicultural background, so I can make a lot of friends.

Li Qiang saw studying abroad in Canada as a chance for a deeper dive into Canadian society and culture, well beyond what a casual tourist might have discerned. "I want to see the world, but I

don't just want to visit for three days. I want to live outside Shanghai for a while. Study, work, and try to get to know the people and the culture there."

In 2010, Ying (Undergraduate student, China, Stites C.) had helped welcome the world to Shanghai for the World Expo. For her, studying in Canada provided an opportunity to recapture the excitement she had felt when interacting with people from all over the world. "People came to Expo from two hundred countries. I had to learn lots of new things and it was wonderful. Studying abroad is another chance for me to learn new things. It's so wonderful." Amina (Undergraduate student, Pakistan GLU) came from a well-traveled family. For her, study in Canada meant the opportunity for more exploring. "Since childhood I've visited many different countries with my parents. They wanted me to know that how life is outside Pakistan. But I'd never been to Canada. I wanted to experience a new culture and learn what Canada was about." The cultural immersion Jack (Graduate student, India, GLU) craved involved experiencing a fully developed, efficient Western economy operating at full throttle.

> I come from a very small city in India. One of the things that I wanted to experience here in Canada is the way the economy works, because North America is the superpower. You guys are very good in all things. That's what I want to learn about. And that's what I've noticed in the three or four months since I came to Canada. I've noticed that every person here works. It's not the same in India. In India, forty percent of the population works, and the other sixty percent doesn't contribute much to the economy.

Omolara (Undergraduate student, Nigeria, Everitt-Rollins C.) wanted something completely different: new surroundings, new people, new *everything*. "Actually, I love everything about life outside Nigeria. It's so different from my country. Everything is perfect, just the way I wanted. Just how it is. It's different, so I like it just this way."

Influencers on student choice during the predisposition stage. Different reference groups influence student choice making in different ways and at different time points (Pimpa,

2001; 2003; 2005; 2008). Student participants were readily able to identify who they consulted when first pondering whether to go abroad, as well as who had the greatest influence on this decision. Their responses largely aligned with Pimpa's (2001; 2003) findings that family members' influence extends across the five categories he identified: *finance* (the family's ability and willingness to fund the student's education); *information* (the extent to which others' experience of postsecondary education abroad influences the student's decision-making); *expectation* (the extent to which influencers' values and opinions shape student decision-making); *persuasion* (leveraging a relationship with the student to influence their decision-making); and *competition* (concern for social rivalries and status informing efforts to influence student decision-making).

Respondents also named peers as important sources of information and insight, but their stories support Pimpa's (2001; 2003) finding that peers' influence is not as extensive as that of parents' and families' influence. Respondents did not cite agents as an influential reference group at the predisposition stage of the search process, which aligned with Pimpa's finding that agent influence is limited to *information* and *persuasion*. Respondents usually did not initiate contact with agents until they had made the decision to study outside their home countries. As such, agents did not inspire respondents to go abroad. Rather, they stimulated their clients' interest in a particular destination country and institution(s). They did this both by providing information on postsecondary options to their clients, and by persuading them that the PSEIs they represented would satisfy their interests. No respondent indicated that they had *only* consulted parents *or* friends *or* colleagues. Students always reported talking with multiple reference groups, with friends and family as the most frequently cited. A story Chao (Graduate

student, China, GLU) told illustrates the way in which many students seek counsel from the people closest to them.

> The decision I made was influenced by advice from my friends and family as well as my own thoughts. My mother wanted me to study abroad. It's one of her dreams, but she didn't want to push me to do something I didn't want to do. As time went on I realized it wasn't a bad idea. Some of my best friends were planning to study abroad. So I talked with them, asking about their plans for the future, their career plans, and where they were going to study: America, Europe, Canada, or Australia? I also asked if they planned to come in a few years, once they have graduated. Meanwhile, my parents told me about their friends' children. They went abroad for school and had a very good experience. My parents want me to have a promising future as well. So little by little, I made up my mind: OK. I will plan for this. I want this.

Parents and families. Twenty-one of 23 respondents indicated that their parents had played a primary role in influencing the choice to seek postsecondary opportunities abroad—by far the most commonly cited reference group. Parents comprise the most influential sub-reference group included under the rubric of *families,* which I use here to refer to a student's parents, siblings, and extended family members (e.g., aunts and uncles, cousins, and grandparents). Parents encouraged their children to go abroad either because they believed a brighter future awaited them outside their home countries, or because conditions at home were becoming dangerous. For the parents of three Pakistani students, growing instability at home motivated them to send their children to Canada. Other respondents' parents hoped the experience would expand their horizons and enhance access to personal and career opportunities. One respondent's mother had never gotten to study abroad herself. This drove her conviction to support her daughter's efforts once a Canadian university had offered her admission.

Support from parents took a variety of forms. Some respondents mentioned the emotional support and encouragement they received from parents as very important. Other respondents' parents provided advice and counsel related to the search itself. Some leveraged personal and

professional networks to identify local students who were already studying abroad: peers who could provide advice or agent referrals. For some respondents, financial support from parents was critical. The costs associated with going abroad—agent fees, application and visa fees, travel costs, tuition and fees, and living expenses—are significant, while the financial aid that Canadian PSEIs make available to international students is nonexistent at the undergraduate level and scarce at the graduate level. Of all the reference groups respondents named, parents were the only ones resourced and willing to help fund education-related costs (Pimpa's *financial* influence category). Chao's (Graduate student, China, GLU) story provides an example of the many different kinds of support parents offered their children in service of their ambitions.

> I think my mom had the most influence on my decisions. Because my mom knows me better than anyone else does. She's my mom. And sometimes when I feel unhappy or unsuccessful, it's always my mom who encourages me. Studying abroad is her dream for me and so she helped me prepare. Emotionally, she encouraged me. Financially, she gathered the funds I would need to study abroad. She also consulted other people about how to study abroad, what I would need. And as for the agent I used, it was my mom who had first contact with them.

For some respondents, financial support from parents was critical. They would not been able to study abroad otherwise. As Zhang Min (Graduate student, China, GLU) explained. "I think my parents influenced my decision-making most. I need their support to pay my tuition fee and my living expenses. If they don't want me to go study abroad, I can't go." Li Qiang's (Graduate student, China, Langside U.) parents were unequivocal in their support for his bid to come to Canada. "My parents were an important influence, since they'd need to support me financially. They said wherever I want to go, it's my decision. They'll always support me. Just don't let them down and make them proud of me." Jack (Graduate student, India, GLU) described how his father's willingness to bankroll an extended postsecondary search process had been essential.

> I would say my father had the greatest influence. He worked with me on every step. He was with me, when I started the process. I was lucky that I had the luxury of money because of the application fees. It's only a hundred dollars here in Canada, but that's 6,000 rupees in India for just one application. My father just gave me the money. So that's why I think I'm very lucky that I have parents who paid for my education. I have paid almost 30,000 dollars for this master's program and they paid my fees in full. I have a very good father who can see the future. And that's how I came to Canada.

Zhang Xiu Ying's (Graduate student, China, GLU) family was not as affluent as Jack's, but her mother saw supporting her daughter's aspirations as a chance to fulfill her own deferred dreams.

> When I first shared my idea to go abroad, she thought it was a good idea but she wasn't sure I could make it. She said that I should give it a shot. If I make it, she will support me with whatever she had. When she was young, my mother dreamed of going abroad to see the world outside. She didn't make it, so she hoped I can make the dream come true for her.

Siblings and extended family members could also influence student goal development, especially if they were living, working, and studying abroad themselves. They could serve as role models, recommend agents, destination countries, or PSEIs, and provide safe harbor for students who chose to join them. Khalid (Graduate student, Pakistan, GLU) recalled his cousin's support and encouragement for his own dream of going abroad for graduate study. "My cousin provided the most guidance. He did his Ph.D. at Berkeley so he always tried to persuade me to pursue a master's degree abroad." Many of Aditya's (Graduate student, India, GLU) cousins had gone abroad and the success they had found inspired him. "I can think of many examples of cousins who have progressed in their life. I used to gain a lot of inspiration from them, and so that made me think about going abroad for school." Jack's (Graduate student, India, GLU) grandparents had worked extensively abroad while raising their family. The experience had profoundly affected Jack's father, who in turn encouraged Jack's ambitions to go to Canada.

> It was my father who motivated me to go abroad. My grandparents lived and worked in Tanzania and Kenya for ten years. My father lived there with them, and so he knew the

> importance of global exposure. Africa wasn't that developed at that time, but yes, it was something more than India. He always said that you should see something more than India. You should leave this place and check out new places. That's how businesses develop and that's how you get new ideas. So he was the first one who motivated me in the first place.

Parents could also sometimes use their networks to connect their children with people in a position to advise them. Li Xia's (Graduate student, China, GLU) mother's friends had children studying abroad. "She learned something about going abroad from her friends, and she told me that someone who studies abroad can often find a good job afterward." Vivaan's (Graduate student, India, GLU) mother was a teacher. During parent-teacher meetings she spoke with other parents with children studying in Canada. "In the process she got to know about life here in Canada, the educational system here, the opportunities here. And then she would come and tell my father and me. She had quite an impact on my decision."

Despite the support many parents provided, others were more skeptical. Their hesitation or opposition could have a significant influence on student aspirations to go abroad. Vivaan's parents had not always been so supportive of his interest in going back to school. Their concerns initially persuaded him to put his search on hold for a year.

> Obviously I discussed this with my parents first. They asked me to think twice before doing this. They thought it was stupid to leave a job and go back to school. They asked me if I was ready to study again. 'You have not studied for the past four years. You have had a break. You are now leisurely. Your mind is relaxed. You are not into education now.' Science tells us that at a certain age it becomes more difficult to learn. My parents didn't discourage the idea completely, but they suggested that I have a rethink. So I thought about it for a whole year before finally applying to university abroad.

Other respondents' parents were equally cautious. The decision to send a son or daughter thousands of kilometers away to an unfamiliar place is not an easy one, and their absence can put a strain on family members back home. Aditya (Graduate student, India, GLU) recalled his parents' hesitation. "Initially they were happy, but my parents are very old. They worried about

feeling lonely because I was the only person supporting the family." Parents were also not always united in their support of a son or daughter's decision to go abroad. Aditya described how his father's support helped compensate for his mother's indecision. "My Dad supported me a lot during the process. Mom was more emotional and her support wavered. Sometimes she said yes, sometimes she was undecided, and sometimes she said no. So his support was really critical."

Other respondents described a cultural context in which parental support was accompanied by specific expectations as to when, where, what, and for how long their children could be away. Jack (Graduate student, India, GLU) speculated that parental expectations in India might uniquely pressure Indian male students. "If you're a guy who isn't earning anything by 30, that's a very bad thing in India. Our parents are so rigid in their ways. They want everything to be done by a certain age." He recalled an encounter with a Canadian co-worker that highlighted the differences between Indian parents and their Canadian counterparts.

> I work with a guy at Tim Horton's. He's just left school because he wants to be a rapper. His parents actually allowed him to drop out of school and become a rapper. That would *never* happen in India. It could never happen. If I tell my parents that I want to be a rapper, they would just beat me up. That's what they would do, trust me. Indian parents are very rigid. My parents—like all Indian parents—they want their children to finish their studies by 24. If you are going for further study at 28, it's very odd. Once you get a job, you must get married. It's practically compulsory. So it all depends on your age. By 24, you should be done with your studies. By 26, you should be married. By 28, you should have kids. That's how Indian parents are. They want everything on their timeline.

As Jack's story suggests, international students may feel compelled to factor familial obligations into their plans. He remembered his grandparents proposing a strategy that could allow him to go abroad while still meeting his parents' expectations. "They told me to go abroad now for five or ten years, then come back and implement what I've learned." Jack was fortunate in that his parents were still quite young and thus would not likely require his support for quite some time. "My father is 50 while my mother is 48. In India, we serve our parents in their old age. This

gives me a lot of time to explore things and then go back."

Only two students – both female undergraduate students – said that they had needed their parents' permission to go. Omolara (Undergraduate student, Nigeria, Everitt-Rollins C.) remembered her father's initial opposition. "I didn't believe I'd ever leave the country. I talked to my dad about it once, and he said he could never allow me to leave the country, to leave his sight. So I didn't think I would ever go." Omolara had thrived in high school. She planned to go to university in Nigeria until a conversation with her cousin's mother prompted her to think again of going abroad. "She told me my cousin is going, so we should go together. She agreed to talk to my dad for me. My dad agreed with her, so that's how I'm here." Amina's (Undergraduate student, Pakistan, GLU) father didn't need convincing that study abroad was a great idea, but he did insist she follow in her brother's footsteps. "My brother studies at Grant Lawrence, so my dad said I have to come to Canada too. I didn't want to come to Canada. I wanted to go to the U.K. And I didn't want to come to this university. I wanted to go to Langside. But through my agent's encouragement, my mind went over to Grant Lawrence." (Recall that Amina's agent was also a relative.)

Peers. Thirteen of 23 respondents reported that their peers were also an important reference group. Here I use *peers* to include individuals that student respondents named as friends or classmates. Earlier I discussed Pimpa's (2001; 2003) findings that the influence of peers is limited to *information*, *competition*, and *persuasion*. Respondents' stories provide evidence that peers already living, working, and studying abroad are best positioned to exercise this influence across these three categories. Peers who had already found success abroad could serve as role models and provide advice and recommendations. In contrast, peers who had not gone abroad were only able to offer general support and encouragement and their influence was

more modest. All respondents reported positive reactions from friends after disclosing their interest in education abroad. Actively pursuing a postsecondary search, securing offers of admission (especially from ranked PSEIs), and finding success abroad all confer an elevated social status abroad (Pimpa's *competition* influencing factor). This elevated status makes role models of friends and family members already living abroad. It may also raise the stakes with regard to the social cost of failure. The prospect of diminished social status led one respondent to keep silent about his search until after he received an offer of admission.

Peers with experience abroad. Peers with first-person experience of life, work, and study abroad can exercise significant influence on student decision-making. Aarav (Graduate student, India, GLU) watched many of his friends obtain student visas and secure admissions offers. Their success encouraged him to give it a try. "Some of my friends already had admissions offers and visas a month after graduating with their bachelor's degrees. We all had friends who had already gone abroad. It got me excited to try to go abroad myself." Subhash (Graduate certificate, India, Metcalfe C.) hoped to stay in Canada after graduation to start a business. He named a family friend who had done exactly that as a role model. "He came here as a student, applied for PR, and now he owns a convenience store. He told me coming here is a good idea. He said I could finish school, get a work permit, and then settle down here."

Li Qiang's (Graduate student, China, Langside U.) interest in Canada was sparked by a friend's decision to enroll at a Canadian university. "One of my classmates was at Chittenden University, so I decided to apply to schools nearby like Langside. That's why I'm here." Interestingly, Li Qiang chose not to tell his friends very much about his search process. "I didn't want to bother my friends too much. I just wanted to tell them the result: I got the offer and I'm going to go. Why don't we celebrate and have a party? I didn't want to get them involved in the

process because it's kind of personal." One of the influencing factors Pimpa described is called *competition*: the extent to which concern for social status or rivalries inform student choice making. Li Qiang had applied to several prestigious Canadian universities. Had he invited his friends' opinions and support, they might have expected to be apprised of the search outcome. His reticence to do so suggests he was unwilling to bear the potential social costs if his search had failed. Rather, he waited until the search concluded successfully—with admission to a highly respected Canadian university in a well-known city—before he shared any of the details with his friends.

Peers without experience abroad. Peers who hadn't gone abroad and had no plans to do so were less influential on student decision-making. They could support and encourage, but could offer little in terms of credible advice and suggestions. Many of Li Xia's (Graduate student, China, GLU) friends had no plans to go abroad, but they supported her aspirations to do so. "They think studying abroad is cool and wonderful. They think it's an amazing thing and that I will meet different people and make new friends." Yasmin's (Graduate student, Pakistan, GLU) homebound friends were equally enthusiastic. "In my country, going abroad is a craze. Everybody wants to go abroad so my friends were all supportive." Zhang Min's (Graduate student, China, GLU) friends considered her a role model. "When I talk to my friends, they say they are excited for me. They think studying abroad is amazing. My coming here makes them think they can come here too." Zhang Xiu Ying's (Graduate student, China, GLU) friends were also supportive, even as one friend's personal circumstances prevented her from following. "I told close friends about my decision. They thought I was brave to go abroad alone. One friend said if she had my courage she would come along with me, but she got married and had a baby, so she didn't." Vivaan's (Graduate student, India, GLU) friend believed his career was at a dead-

end and so began investigating master's programs abroad. His efforts inspired Vivaan to do the same. "We both started the process together, but along the way he found a new job and dropped out. I left my job and came to Canada for school."

Teachers, colleagues, and supervisors. Six respondents mentioned that they discussed plans to study abroad with teachers, while two respondents said colleagues and supervisors had influenced their decision-making. Both reference groups could offer support and encouragement as well as assurance that a Canadian postsecondary credential was a worthy objective. Murad's (Graduate student, India, GLU) professors had never suggested to him that he go abroad for graduate study, but they were supportive when he approached them. "I told my teachers of my plan to go abroad. They supported me but they had never actually encouraged the idea. It was me who told them that I was interested." Yasmin's professors were also supportive, even as they hoped she would return after graduation. "I needed letters of recommendation so I told my professors about my interest in going abroad. They were happy with my decision. They encourage students to go abroad. But they appreciate when students return to pay back what they've learned."

Two respondents who had completed bachelor's degrees and worked for a time before applying to graduate school in Canada reported that their colleagues and supervisors were an important reference group. Malik (Graduate certificate, India, Everitt-Rollins C.) recalled initiating a conversation with his supervisor.

> One of the companies I worked with has offices in the U.S. and Canada. I really wanted to come abroad for work as well as training that will help advance my career. At the time, I didn't see many opportunities available at work. I decided that if I wanted to move into management or any senior position, going abroad for school would help. I was on a one on one basis with the director and one of the senior managers there. I spoke to them about this and they said that if new opportunities come in, this could really happen for me. So I decided to switch my focus towards more education so I can add certifications to my

resume.

Li Wei (Graduate student, China, GLU) had worked in the hypercompetitive financial sector in Shanghai. He saw limitless opportunities there for someone with his knowledge and skills and planned to return after graduation with a credential he believed would enhance his standing in the job market. Before committing, he reality-tested this proposition with his colleagues and supervisor. "Most people told me it will help a lot. If I want to work for a big foreign firm, I need to improve my English and get an education outside China. That's very important."

Conclusion. Dissatisfaction with the status quo and hope for a brighter future impel students to seek education abroad. Most of the goals most often mentioned by study participants fit comfortably into the push-and-pull model proposed by Mazzarol and Soutar (2002). At the predisposition stage, students imagine best-case scenarios – academic success, career advancement, exploration, challenge, and adventure – projected onto a mostly blank canvas. Stories, advice, support, and recommendations from reference group members add detail to the picture and further catalyze student interest in going abroad. As previous research (Pimpa 2001; 2003; 2005; 2008; Bodycott, 2009; Bodycott & Lai, 2012) found, reference groups exercise varying levels of influence at different time points in the search process. Respondents named parents and family, peers, and teachers and colleagues or supervisors as most influential during the initial—or predisposition—stage of the search, with parents exercising the most influence. Parents' support took many forms: emotional, financial, and logistical. For some respondents, the presence or absence of one or more of these forms of support determined whether or not they could go abroad. That said, any reference group member with firsthand experience of life, work, and study abroad could provide useful, credible information. Respondents said that this information was often the basis for important early decisions with regard to destination country,

region, and education level.

These same reference groups also influence domestic student choice making (Chapman, 1981). North American students from middle or high SES backgrounds likely know many people who attended a postsecondary institution. They may have visited a postsecondary campus, attended an education fair, participated in academic enrichment activities, and had access to guidance counselors. These connections and experiences constitute rich networks of information and guidance that can nourish and inform their postsecondary aspirations. In contrast, many international students' networks (like that of domestic students from low SES backgrounds) are more sparse. Their parents and family members may have postsecondary experience, but not outside their home countries. Their high schools or undergraduate institutions may lack the resources to help them pursue education abroad. They may know only a handful of people living, working, and studying abroad. The sparseness of these networks may both lead students to rely on anecdotal information and guidance provided by reference group members and limit their ability to access its applicability to their needs and interests. These networks also provide an important context for student decisions to hire and use agents.

Theme Two: Student Perceptions of the Affordances and Limitations of Agent Involvement

The second theme pertains to student perceptions of the affordances and limitations of agent use. Just as students' reference group networks help organize their search objectives, they also shape student perceptions of agents. Given the lack of regulation or oversight governing agent use, students must rely on word of mouth, information, advice, and referrals from people in their networks when determining whether to hire an agent and which agent to hire. Students use the information these networks provide to answer a series of questions: Should I use an agent? In what ways can agent involvement benefit me? What are the drawbacks of hiring an agent? Do

the benefits outweigh the drawbacks? What metrics should I use in evaluating a prospective agent? What is a reasonable fee? While respondents were generally successful in gathering answers to these questions from their reference group networks, the lack of transparency with which agents operate constrained students' ability to reach definitive conclusions. Yes, agents could help their clients secure admissions offers, but was their success due to their relationships with PSEI administrators, as some of them asserted? Yes, agents sometimes steered their clients to colleges, but were they right in claiming their clients were ill prepared for university-level study? While respondents knew to be wary when working with an agent, they generally didn't know what they didn't know.

The ubiquity of agent involvement may make their use seem like a foregone conclusion for many students. Agents can provide a familiar, responsive, and local interface between their clients and a complex, foreign system. Moreover, they often manage the lion's share of the tasks associated with the search. As Yasmin (Graduate student, Pakistan, GLU) explained, "With an agent involved, you don't have to search by yourself. They serve you ready-made cooked food." Later in the interview, she also pointed out the dilemma facing the client in her analogy: the diner purchasing the ready-made meal doesn't know what ingredients went into the dish, how it was prepared, or what constituted the base cost and the mark-up. "Agents who mislead their clients are misguiding a blind man," she asserted. "They're simply taking their clients' money. They have served their customer a ten dollar dish but charged him a hundred dollars."

Yasmin's metaphor of the diner who pays for expertise and convenience but relinquishes oversight illustrates the dilemma students face. Respondents believed hiring an agent would make achieving a desired outcome more likely. Achieving that outcome requires an applicant to complete a number of unfamiliar and complex tasks. Students unwilling or unable to invest the

time needed can outsource this work to an agent, as with Yasmin's metaphor of ordering takeout. Respondents also understood (to varying degrees) that this convenience comes with a price—trusting that the agent won't swindle or mislead them in service of maximizing their profit. In general, students interviewed knew to be suspicious but didn't have a reliable way to evaluate their agents' advice. As Chao (Graduate student, China, GLU) explained, "With agents it's always business, and money talks. Even the contract you sign with them can be disobeyed sometimes. Even if you pay them, you cannot be sure what kind of service you will get."

Affordances. Students would not hire agents if they saw no advantage in doing so. Respondents' stories revealed pattern with regard to student perceptions of the affordances of agent use. I identify the most common answers in this section.

Agent knowledge and experience. Students hire agents to be expert "knowers" and experienced "doers". Sixteen of 23 respondents identified agent knowledge of the PSE sector and the PSEI application process as a primary affordance of agent use, while eleven of 23 respondents identified agent expertise in immigration law and the visa process as a primary affordance of agent use. Students hired an agent to compensate for their lack of knowledge and familiarity with the search process. As Aditya (Graduate student, India, GLU) explained, "It's a normal thing in India. People use agents in order to get them admission over here, because not everyone has that kind of knowledge of how the admission process works." Aarav (Graduate student, India, GLU) agreed. "In India, most students use agents because we don't have that much information about how to get admission abroad." Jack's (Graduate student, India, GLU) observation hints at the ubiquity of agent use in his country. "I have never met a Indian student who went abroad and didn't use an agent." The application and visa process can be confounding,

especially for students lacking fluency in English. As Khalid (Graduate student, Pakistan, GLU) pointed out, this also drives many students to seek help from an agent.

> For me, it was not that difficult, but I've met a couple of people here who are from Pakistan, and their English is not that good. They need help with their forms. And, you know, this university‘s forms are quite lengthy and need lots of understanding to complete. Agents develop expertise because they’ve reviewed these forms over and over again. But for students who are going to Canada for the first time, applying for the first time, they need help. And agents can help you a lot.

Figure 2 provides a visual representation of the “knowing” and “doing” related services that agents provide.

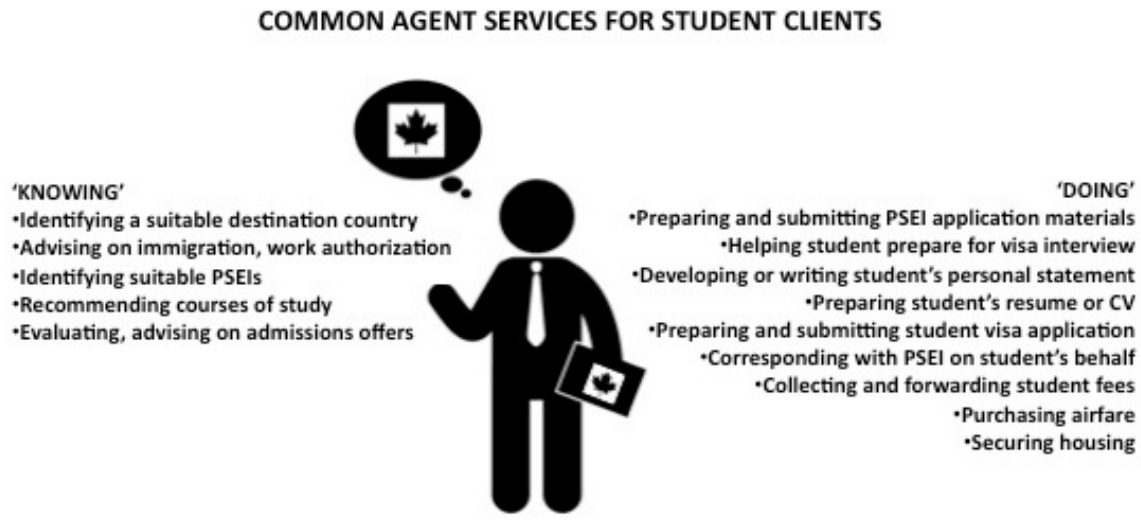

Figure 2 Common Services That Agents Provide Student Clients

Even as students appreciate the assistance agents provide, their lack of knowledge limits their ability to assess the extent to which agent involvement adds value. When Aarav (Graduate student, India, GLU) first met with his agent, he agreed that she would manage his application for a student visa. He later discovered an online checklist for the visa application process. “There was really nothing for her to do. You just had to file the documents per the checklist. And for this, she charged me 10,000 Indian rupees (approximately US$167, or C$182). If I had done it

myself, I would've saved 10,000 rupees." In his interview, Aarav justified the expense, theorizing that perhaps the chances of his visa application being approved were better with his agent's help. His decision may also have been somewhat of a forced choice. "My agent told me it was required to apply for a visa through her. So I said OK. I knew that way I'll get a visa for sure." I provide further discussion of the dilemma students face in evaluating agent value in the section on student perceptions of the limitations of agent use.

Agent involvement preferable to applying directly. The decision of whether or not to use an agent is the first big search-related decision students face. Respondents concluded that hiring an agent was preferable to applying directly for several reasons. The ubiquity of agent use leads many students to infer that agent involvement is essential for achieving a successful outcome. Some found an agent's guidance to be comforting when faced with navigating a high-stakes and unfamiliar process. Even as they were unsure of exactly what value agent involvement provided, hiring one anyway was a good way of hedging their bets. Anecdotal stories from peers who tried and failed on their own concerned some respondents, who worried about wasting time and money. One respondent provided a counterexample of this, recounting instances in which friends secured offers of admission without an agent's help.

For Murad (Graduate student, India, GLU), hiring an agent made a lot of sense. The advice and assistance they provided simplified the search process at a minimal cost. "People like the help agents provide. Very few students can manage it all by themselves. They like having someone to help them through the process. Agents really do come in handy and they provide good help." He also noted how common agent use was in India. "I have a lot of friends who have applied to go abroad for school. Only one of them got in without the help of an agent. Everyone else had to use the agent." Zhang Xiu Ying (Graduate student, China, GLU) recalled a friend's

search process that she believed served as a cautionary tale for students tempted to apply on their own.

> My decision to use an agent is because of my friend's experience. He applied to five universities by himself. Eventually, all of them rejected his applications, which really frustrated him. The following year, he decided to use an agent to help him try again. He successfully applied to a university in the United States. And now he is studying in the U.S. He told me that agents have lots of experience in helping students apply to universities all over the world. So he recommended that I use an agent to apply to a Canadian university.

Murad (Graduate student, India, GLU) and Zhang Xiu Ying (Graduate student, China, GLU) faced a dilemma with regard to how best to assess the value-add an agent provides. Lacking more information that could have better helped assess agent value, they connected the dots in a way that led both to conclude using an agent was the best course of action. In South Asia, students pay little to nothing to secure an agent's assistance. This provides a significant incentive for students to hire them. As Aarav (Graduate student, India, GLU) explained, "It's convenient to get an agent's help because they don't charge much. That's why everybody hires an agent." Like other students, Murad may have assumed their ubiquity meant agents were indispensible to reaching a successful outcome. Similarly, Zhang Xiu Ying's story is missing critical information. How seriously did her friend apply himself to his applications the first time around? How competitive of a candidate was he for the target institutions he selected? Did all of his materials arrive before the application deadline? How competitive is the admissions process at the university to which his agent recruited him? Lacking this information, Zhang Xiu Ying concluded her friend's assessment of his search was accurate and took his advice to hire an agent.

Other respondents described hiring an agent as a risk management strategy. Earlier in her interviews, Yasmin (Graduate student, India, GLU) had been quite critical of agents, suggesting

that they took advantage of their clients' lack of knowledge. When asked why she had chosen to hire an agent, Yasmin suggested that it provided her some assurance that a complex set of tasks would be done well.

> There's a notion over here that if you hire a consultant, the consultant will do your work and it's going to be done well. If you apply by yourself…well, it's a risk, right? You might make a mistake or something. With a consultant, you have paid them a thousand dollars for their services, so you can be assured that your work will be done well.

Li Na (Graduate student, China, GLU) also worried about the consequences of making mistakes if she applied on her own. Specifically, she feared having to wait another year to apply again if she failed to secure an offer of admission without an agent's help. "I didn't want to waste time if I failed. I thought I'd be delayed in going abroad by a year if my application was rejected, so I used an agency to help me."

Not all respondents' anecdotes pointed to the necessity of agent involvement. Aarav (Graduate student, India, GLU) used an agent to help him apply to graduate programs in Canada, but many of his friends didn't. He suggested this was an emerging trend in sending countries. "Some of my friends got admission offers without an agent's help. They searched on the Internet and applied on their own. And now they're studying at universities in Germany, Australia, New Zealand, all over the world." As the present study's eligibility criteria required prospective participants to have used an agent, the experiences of students who applied on their own were not included. Aarav's comments suggest an interesting direction for future research.

Agent relationships with PSEIs. Six respondents cited their agents' relationship with the PSEIs for which they recruited as an advantage of agent use. Here again, a lack of information and transparency prompted students to fill in the blanks. Some imagined agents could leverage this relationship to expedite the admissions process or make an offer more likely. Others inferred

that it was a marker of agent credibility or a sign of enhanced access to institutional decision-makers and resources. Agents sometimes took advantage of this lack of clarity to claim an influence they didn't have. I provide a particularly striking of this in the following section.

Li Wei (Graduate student, China, GLU) believed that his agent's relationship with Grant Lawrence helped assure that he was speedily admitted.

> Agents have longstanding relationships with these schools, so they know how to do things quickly. It saved me a lot of trouble. First, I applied to the agency. I went for an interview with them, where they asked me questions. I filled out some forms and then they did everything else. All I needed to do is to give them my passport, school records, and money.

Tashelle (Graduate certificate, Jamaica, Everitt-Rollins C. / Chang C.) also believed she benefitted from her agent's connections at Everitt-Rollins College, even after matriculating. "I think he has more access than if I'd applied on my own. He has affiliations with people here, so he made the process much easier. Even now if I have a question, I can still ask him for help." Aarav (Graduate student, India, GLU) had five "backlogs" (required undergraduate courses that he had either withdrawn from or failed). "I met with the agent. She knew I had five backlogs but agreed to try. She had some good contacts here at Grant Lawrence and said she can get me admission, so I applied through her." Murad (Graduate student, India, GLU) believed that his agent's affiliation with GLU meant that the information they provided was accurate. "It helps to use an agent because the information you get from them is more authentic, since the agent is certified by the university itself." Yasmin (Graduate student, Pakistan, GLU) made the same assumption. "My agent was recommended by Grant Lawrence so I was not that afraid of fraudulent agent behavior."

Agent relationships with embassy/consulate. Six respondents cited their agents' relationship with embassy or consular officials as an advantage of agent use. Just as some

students hoped their agents' institutional connections would benefit their chances of admission, so too did some believe an agent could help assure speedy approval of their visa applications. Amina (Undergraduate student, Pakistan, GLU) believed her agent's connections with government officials would work to her advantage. "She said it's all about experience. Of course she also had links with the Canadian government." Aarav (Graduate student, India, GLU) thought the same about his agent. "I was sure that my agent can get me a visa easily, because she knows how to apply and she has strong connections with the embassy." Khalid (Graduate student, Pakistan, GLU) was working full-time when he began applying to graduate programs in Canada, and didn't feel he had the time to apply for a visa himself. "My agency has so many students applying for Canada that they send the visa applications to the embassy in bulk. They have some arrangement with the embassy so I don't have to go myself," he explained. "I didn't have to do much legwork, and that was very good for me."

In one instance, an agent misrepresented her relationship both with consular officials and admissions staff to manipulate a prospective client. Jack (Graduate student, India, GLU) had already hired an agent to apply to Grant Lawrence University. The agent—a recent GLU alumnus—was fairly new and eager to develop a good reputation. Jack was pleased with his experience, but nevertheless approached a second agent who formally represented the university.

> I told her that I had already applied to Grant Lawrence with the help of this other agent. Nevertheless, she also asked for a commission from me. She told me that I had to give it to her. If I didn't, she would make problems for me with the visa process. She told me that her agency has a person who stands there with the visa officer, and he will make sure your visa is done. I thought to myself that this can never happen. If you have so many contacts, then why are you in this business? Then she threatened me. She said that if I didn't pay her a commission, then she could also make problems for me with my application to university. I had to give her the money to help with my visa application. I didn't have any option because I was scared. I thought, what if she calls Grant Lawrence? What if she really does have contacts there and she tells them, 'don't give admission to this guy'?

Agent involvement can accelerate time to completion. Many students believe that an agent can accelerate the time to process completion. Respondents experience time anxiety related to the search process for several reasons. First, students must successfully navigate and complete two complex processes—the admissions process for the PSEI institutions they select, and the student visa application process. They have no control over how long these processes take, and no way to come up with a reliable estimate. Moreover, whatever experiences they (or reference group members) may have had with equivalent administrative processes in their home countries may not be predictive. Subhash (Graduate student, India, Metcalfe C.) recalled the experience of a friend who applied on his own. "It took two months for him to submit his documents and get an admission offer. With an agent's help, it took me fifteen days. The processing time was good because of this consultancy. I didn't want to waste a semester." Here again, we are missing information from Subhash's story that could help ascertain agent value. Subhash applied to a college with rolling admission and an open admissions policy. Had his friend applied to a university with a more selective admissions process? Aditya (Graduate student, India, GLU) shared Subhash's impression. "If you apply through an agent, they can process your application within three or four weeks. If you apply on your own, it will take four to five months. It's a long process. When you use an agent, you can save time."

Secondly, Canada may not have been their first choice. They may have applied for admissions and a visa elsewhere and been denied. Unless they applied for a Canadian visa simultaneously, rejection by their first choice destination country put them back to square one. Vivaan (Graduate student, India, GLU) recalled how the U.S. had been his—and his parents—first choice. "Even though I talked to them about Australia, Germany, and the U.K., they were not interested. It was only after my U.S. visa application was rejected that they told me to apply

elsewhere. That's when I applied to Germany and Canada." Canada became Plan B for Murad (Graduate student, India, GLU) as well after his visa application for the U.S. was rejected. He recalled a conversation with his agent shortly after learning he had been denied by the U.S.

> He actually responded in a very positive manner. He said there was nothing wrong with my profile. No one knows what the U.S immigration people look for. I had good grades, a decent GRE score. My GRE score was not absolutely fantastic or something but it was OK. I even had admissions offers from good universities in the U.S. I told the agent what I was asked during my visa interview. He said there's nothing wrong with my profile, so I can try again for the U.S., or I can apply to Canada. So I applied to Canada.

Murad's (Graduate student, India, GLU) parents had been just as enthusiastic as Vivaan's (Graduate student, India, GLU) about the prospect of his going to the U.S. for school. After his visa application was denied, he did not want to get their hopes up about Canada prematurely. "I wanted to be sure of my information before I told my parents anything," he recalled. "So I spoke to some agents in Mumbai. Once I was sure that I could be admitted to a Canadian university, then I explained it to my parents."

Malik's (Graduate certificate, India, Everitt-Rollins C.) agent had a ready answer when he approached her with an interest in the U.S. He did some preliminary research on a few schools in the U.S. and then went to meet with an agent.

> The agent really pushed Canada. She mentioned other clients whose visa applications had been rejected by the U.S. They didn't have very specific data as to why the U.S visas were being rejected. So she said, if you want to apply to the U.S., you should wait. Perhaps it's not the right time. She looked at my file and said, "You don't really have any dark sides, but I wouldn't want you to be turned down by the U.S. either. So let's try the U.K. or Canada. You pick." So I thought OK, maybe Canada is the place.

For students like Vivaan (Graduate student, India, GLU) and Murad (Graduate student, India, GLU), rejection by their first choice destination countries left them scrambling for an alternative. Vivaan had applied for a visa hoping to begin his studies in the fall. "I'd be wasting a

lot of time if I had to wait until summer." he explained. "That's why my priority was to get an admission offer somewhere for winter term. That was Plan A. Plan B was summer. I knew most of the winter deadline dates had passed, but I still wanted to take a chance." Vivaan was so determined to avoid a delay that—on his agent's advice—he considered a significant shift in his intended program of study. His first choice was a master's program in engineering. "They told me if my visa application didn't go through, they could get me admitted to the management program later on. This appealed to me but I wanted to try first for engineering. Why waste the time in between?" Vivaan's agent suggested he consider other universities as well, but his time anxiety led him to settle on Grant Lawrence. "I was in a hurry, really in a hurry, " he recalled. "They were able to get me admitted to Grant Lawrence immediately." Representatives of other PSEIs told him they could get him an admissions offer but for the following academic year, not winter as he hoped. "They told me they would have to scrutinize my application and that will take time." The speed with which Vivaan's agents promised an admissions decision (and their offer of a back-up plan) were the most significant factors in his decision to go to Grant Lawrence.

Third, students who delayed starting the search process often reported time anxiety. Three respondents reported waiting until after graduation before starting to investigate graduate programs abroad. As this is well after application deadlines for many highly ranked institutions have passed, students who aspired to these schools faced two choices. They could delay further and apply the following year, or else apply to lesser-ranked institutions that were still willing to accept their applications. Chao (Graduate student, China, GLU) decided he needed an agent once he realized his classmates had begun their searches well before he did. "I started applying a little late. Most of my classmates had begun the process before me. I thought perhaps I won't be able

to do this on my own. I need an agency to help me, so I hired one." Aditya (Graduate student, India, GLU) completed a bachelor's degree in civil engineering in July, then began looking for a graduate program overseas. "I was searching from June to September," he recalled. His search ended when his agent told him that a GLU faculty member planned to offer "on-the-spot" admission at an upcoming education fair.

> An agent told me that I could get an admission offer on the spot. He explained that the professor will assess your grades, and if they satisfy the university's requirements, then you will get an offer of admission on the spot. So I just went there and attended the session. The professor was there. He reviewed my transcript and marks and gave me admission. Then I was told that you have to come to the agent office. So I went there and I paid them a hundred dollar application fee.

Aditya applied for a student visa, was approved, and began his studies in January. Given his haste and the speed with which he secured an admission offer, his disinterest in other universities is not surprising. "I didn't consider other schools because time was running out. If I'd applied elsewhere it would have taken around four or five months more. Basically I would have wasted a whole year. It would be a loss to me."

Aarav (Graduate student, India, GLU) made a similar decision for the same reason. A friend's cousin was at Eaton, a well-regarded university. "With his guidance, I started thinking that I could get admission to university as well," he recalled. Like Aditya, he also waited until after graduation to start his search. While he was initially drawn to several highly ranked universities, he quickly realized he had missed their deadlines. "Grant Lawrence was not top of mind at that time," Aarav remembered. "I was interested in Eaton and Dunn-Barton, but would have had to wait until next year to apply." Moreover, he learned that the admissions process at Eaton was more involved than he'd initially thought. Eaton required applicants to go through an individual faculty member to secure an admission offer, after which they could apply to the

university. “I didn’t have that much time because I didn’t start looking until after graduation. So I decided that I’d apply to other universities instead of waiting for a whole year.” Aarav’s agent also forced the decision to forgo Eaton. She didn’t represent Eaton and so was unwilling to help him apply. “I told her that I want to apply for Eaton. She told me that we would apply only for Grant Lawrence.” Like Aditya, Aarav learned about Grant Lawrence’s on-the-spot admissions program from his agent. He was dubious at first. “It was very strange, because no other universities make on-the-spot admission offers. No U.S. university, no Australian university, nobody else.” He met with a professor recruiting for Grant Lawrence at an education fair, applied, and was ultimately accepted into a master’s program in engineering.

For students who got a late start, were denied a visa to a first-choice destination country, or who worried about an unpredictable time to process completion, agents were often seen as a compensating strategy to secure a quick, successful outcome. An agent could quickly identify remaining available options, and the expedited admissions pathways they managed could deliver an offer within weeks or even days, not months. While using an agent meant choosing from a limited range of PSEIs, students anxious to avoid failure or delays were often quite willing to work within those constraints.

Agent involvement as a timesaving strategy. Students may be unwilling or unable to invest the time needed to manage the postsecondary search process on their own. Some hired an agent as one would an accountant, paying for the use of their time and expertise. Many respondents were in the final year of school or else working full time when their search began. They were the busy customers in Yasmin’s (Graduate student, Pakistan, GLU) metaphor of the take-out restaurant. While they could have cooked a meal themselves, they were willing to pay a premium to outsource the task to someone else with more time and greater expertise. Yasmin

cautioned that customers in this scenario didn't know how their food had been prepared, what ingredients were used, and how big of a mark-up was added to the price. Students face the same scenario. Hiring an agent was convenient, but students did not always know what trade-offs were involved.

Chao (Graduate student, China, GLU) felt that he hadn't the time or the knowledge to conduct his search alone.

> In such urgent times, you have to use an agency. They're more familiar with the process and how to do it. If you do it yourself, you have to look at every university's website, one by one, and it takes a long time. But if you use an agency, they will do perhaps 90 percent of the work, not you.

Zhang Min (Graduate student, China, GLU) agreed. "Using an agent can save you time. While you're doing other things, you can let your agents do the work of applying to university." Subhash (Graduate certificate, India, Metcalfe C.) had an inkling of what was involved if he was going to search on his own. "If I did it by myself, I'd have to Google search on my own. It's better to have access to an agent's knowledge. They can review all the policies, all the terms and conditions. It's better to hire them."

Students who were working full-time were often especially interested in outsourcing responsibility to an agent. Ying (Undergraduate, China, Stites C.) had a demanding work schedule alongside preparations for an English proficiency exam.

> There are a lot of procedures you need to deal with when you're searching. I wasn't sure I could do it by myself, so I asked an agent to help. They can save a lot of time. I had to prepare for the IELTS and there was a lot to do, so I hired them to help me handle everything.

Rahman (Undergraduate student, Pakistan, Ford C.) was facing similar circumstances. "I was damn busy and over-engaged with my job. I had no time to search for prospective schools, so we

paid an agency. Paid them handsomely." Li Wei (Graduate student, China, GLU) was working in Shanghai. He recalled feeling unable to commit the time to puzzling out how and where to apply.

> The advantage to using agents is that they research all the different universities for you. And they know how to apply for a visa very quickly. It's so much trouble to apply for a visa in China, and you have to wait for such a long time. I didn't want to waste my time. I just paid the agent a little money and they did it for me. I was quite busy then, so I didn't have time to fill out forms, talk to people, and do my own research. So it's quite good just to pay money to an agent and they can help come to school in Canada very easily.

Sixteen of 23 respondents cited the chance to outsource search-related tasks to agents as an affordance of agent use. In particular, students facing work- or school-related time constraints often described agent use as a useful and necessary convenience. While students hired an agent intending for them to manage logistics, in essence agents took over much of the decision-making, which they exercised primarily by narrowing students' postsecondary options. As with students whose time anxiety made agent use desirable, students unable or unwilling to commit the time to manage their own search process might be quite willing to outsource logistics and even decision-making to an agent.

No/low cost to hire an agent. Respondents' stories revealed differences in agent fee practices across top sending countries. While Chinese students often paid agent fees totaling thousands of dollars, in contrast Indian and Pakistani students generally paid only a few hundred dollars. In fact, some South Asian respondents mentioned friends whose agents charged them nothing. Students in countries where no to low agent fees were the norm often cited this as an affordance of agent use. Three respondents specifically mentioned the low cost as an incentive to hire an agent. For them, the chance to hire an experienced professional to assist with their postsecondary search at a low cost was too good of an opportunity to pass up. "In my country, the fee that agents charge is really, really low," explained Malik (Graduate certificate, India,

Everitt-Rollins C.). “I don’t know if it’s some kind of promotion, or if they have other ways of making money.” Low agent fees made the decision easy. “I thought, why not leave it to the experts? When compared to the school fees you will pay eventually, the agent fees were really low. One agent I know of is even doing it for free.”

Aarav (Graduate student, India, GLU) also cited low fees as an incentive. “It’s convenient to use an agent's help because they don't charge much: just 5,000 Indian rupees (approximately US$83 or C$88). That's not much money for us. It's normal. So that's why everybody goes for agents.” Subhash’s (Graduate certificate, India, Metcalfe C.) friend understood that agents work on commission, but didn’t believe this had an adverse impact on their clients. “I took my friend’s advice and hired an agent. He said it’s better to go through a consultancy when you apply. They don’t charge you anything. Even though they may get a commission, that’s nowhere related to your personal interest.”

In this section I have reviewed the most common responses respondents provided to questions about the affordances of agent use. Students hire agents because they believe agents have something they lack: knowledge and experience, connections and time. They believe agent knowledge and experience of the admissions and visa process could help them reach a search outcome that met their needs. They imagine agent relationships with consular and admissions staff can work to their advantage. They hope their agent can accelerate the time to search completion, saving them time in the process. In countries where students pay little or nothing in agent fees, hiring an agent can seem like the obvious choice.

Limitations.

Respondents also readily identified disadvantages to the hire and use of an agent. Anecdotal stories of negative experiences gathered from reference group members (particularly

those who had used agents themselves) stoked respondents' concerns. Even still, these stories rarely suggested a strategy that students could reliably use to help them avoid the same pitfalls. In this section I review the most common student responses to questions about the limitations they associated with agent use.

High cost to hire an agent. Students of modest means or who came from countries where students pay a greater share of the cost of agent involvement cited high fees as a drawback of agent use. Six respondents specifically mentioned cost as a drawback of agent use. Students who expressed discomfort with the fee amount were more likely to report post-search dissatisfaction with the agent's performance. They questioned whether the agent's involvement and the tasks they completed justified the fees they charged, especially when they determined the task was straightforward and easily managed. Some students interpreted upcharges for tasks requiring only a modest amount of work as a sign of bad faith on their agents' part. Students who were savvy enough to detect agent upcharging worried that less experienced peers were especially vulnerable.

Zhang Min (Graduate student, China, GLU) really didn't like having to pay the fee her agent charged her. "It's expensive to use someone instead of doing it on your own," she commented. "I think it's a disadvantage of using them." Li Qiang (Graduate student, China, Langside U.) agreed. "I was really reluctant to pay the agency because it's quite a lot of money." Ying (Undergraduate student, China, Stites C.) found agent fees an unpleasant topic. "To be honest, at the time I didn't want to think about it. It cost a lot of money to use an agent. That was the biggest thing for me. And they just want our money, you know?" Aditya (Graduate student, India, GLU) echoed Ying's suspicions about agent priorities. "I didn't have a good experience with agents. They're much more oriented toward making money, rather than providing quality

service. They charge a handsome amount of money. They shouldn't give such poor service when they charge such an amount."

Not surprisingly, students who found their agents' fees burdensome often became critical observers of their work, noting when agents charged them for completing fairly modest, straightforward tasks. "Agents used to charge 1800 rupees (approximately US$ 30 or C$33) just for mailing out our application materials," said Jack (Graduate student, India, GLU). "They took 1800 rupees, just like that. And they just sent it to an address in India. They never sent it to Canada. I never knew that. So they are making a lot of money right now, trust me." Yasmin (Graduate student, Pakistan, GLU) described two kinds of outbound student: those who could easily afford agent fees, and those pursuing study abroad as an exit strategy from a life of poverty. "Some students can afford an agent, but some can't. They live hand-to-mouth. They're here in Canada to settle here with their families, or to earn money they can send back home." These students, she believed, didn't realize how straightforward the admissions process was and how they could apply on their own. "It's really just professional corruption," she asserted.

> There are consultants in Karachi who will take one lakh (100,000 Pakistani rupees; approximately US$1668, or C$1818) just to get you an offer of admission from a Canadian university. But if you apply by yourself, it's just 10,000 rupees (approximately US$101, or C$108). So why one lakh, just for the guidance? Canadian universities charge an application fee of one hundred dollars, and agents charge a thousand dollars to guide you through a process that is described online? All you have to do is read it. And if a student is coming to Canada, he must know English, so all he has to do is read these guidelines.

Like cable providers, agents typically bundle their services. Even when students can identify search-related tasks that they can easily manage, their agent will likely still insist on charging a fee for carrying out the task themselves. While some respondents were content to pay their agent's fee and leave the worrying to them, others who found the fee onerous were more likely to

attend to their agent's work in an effort to ascertain whether their efforts were worth the price they paid.

Agency dilemma. Also referred to as the *principal-agent problem*, the *agency dilemma* describes the conflict of interest that emerges when an agent's best interests and those of their client (or the *principal*) do not perfectly align. Information asymmetry between agent and principal often prevents the principal from ascertaining whether the agent is acting in their best interests. While no respondents directly referenced this concept, it does capture a range of student concerns about agent manipulation. Students hire agents to compensate for the knowledge and experience they lack. This same deficit confounds student attempts to determine whether their agents are acting in good faith and in their best interests. The lack of transparency with which many agents operate complicates this further and contributes to student unease. The anecdotal information respondents gathered from reference group members included clear-cut examples of agent misbehavior.

Zhang Min (Graduate student, China, GLU) associated agent opacity with greater risk for her as a client. "I think hiring an agent was more of a risk. I never got to see for myself what he actually did. I had to take him at his word, without much factual evidence." Yasmin (Graduate student, Pakistan, GLU) framed similar concerns in terms of dependence. "When you hire an agent, you become fully dependent on them. If they tell you the visa application fee is 25,000 rupees (approximately US$253, or C$270), you are bound to pay them. Are they charging more, or not? When you apply by yourself, you know what the exact amount is." Jack (Graduate student, India, GLU) had contact with three different agents in the course of his search process. Comparing and evaluating the often-conflicting advice they provided offered him the chance to assess their truthfulness. "The first agent directed me to apply to college. He told me I'd never

get into a Canadian university, that rankers from India can't go to university in Canada. It's too hard." In contrast, the third agent was a graduate of GLU. "He actually encouraged me to apply to university. He reviewed my transcript and told me I could get into some of the very best universities in Canada."

Stories of agent misbehavior that respondents gathered from reference group members stoked their apprehensions. "I've heard stories about consultants who committed fraud," remembered Yasmin (Graduate student, Pakistan, GLU). "Some agents will charge high fees and not even do your work properly. It's as if they don't even exist." Zhang Min (Graduate student, China, GLU) was also wary. "If your agent is responsible, you can benefit a lot, but not every agent is responsible for their clients. Some agents will lie to their students, or cheat them, and lead them to lose their money." Like Yasmin, Rahman (Undergraduate student, Pakistan, Ford C.) worried especially about poor and inexperienced students. Specifically, he feared that students whose grades, test scores, and English proficiency made them long-shot candidates for admission were being bamboozled into hiring agents.

> Agents should be clear during your consultation. They should—they *must* tell you straightaway if you don't qualify for admission. They shouldn't take you on as a client if they don't think you'll qualify. But this is happening in Pakistan and in other countries. They're giving people false hopes and false assessment of their chances. I worry particularly for those people who are not well educated. They can't read or understand English. They aren't familiar with the forms, the system, and the immigration process. Sometimes agents take advantage of that. They give their clients false hopes. They take their clients' money and tell them their applications have been submitted. And then they show them the rejection letter: "Unfortunately you have been refused." But you still must pay for the consultation. This is happening to people who are not well educated. They cannot understand English. They cannot understand the process. But they are dying to leave the country.

Khalid (Graduate student, Pakistan, GLU) also saw the potential for inexperienced students to be misled. "This is a kind of glitter that surrounds the idea of studying abroad. Kids are very excited

about going abroad. Agents cater to that by presenting you with flashy booklets and brochures." Under such circumstances it was easy to imagine such students being dazzled. Khalid described an encounter with one agent who tried to aggressively recruit him to apply for an institution that he believed was of poor quality.

> If I'd chosen that school, when I got there I would've seen that it was just one building. It would've been a downer. And if I'd completed a course of study there and still couldn't find a job, then it will have been a waste of money for me, simple as that.

Khalid knew that agent activities were unregulated but he suspected many of his peers didn't. "It's really a mercenary thing. These agencies are not regulated by any authority. That's not common knowledge. That's the problem. These agents just serve as they are."

Agents offer a limited choice of PSEIs. There are currently 83 universities and nearly 400 colleges in Canada (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2014). Agents typically offer a highly abbreviated range of these PSEIs to their clients. One third of respondents named the limited choice of PSEIs as a drawback of agent use. Commission-based agents only recommend the PSEIs they represent to their clients. As I have discussed, highly ranked institutions rely on their reputations to drive student demand and thus do not use agents. With no financial incentive to recruit students to these schools, commission-based agents often refuse to assist students in applying. Respondents' stories provided evidence of agent attempts to discourage their clients from applying to PSEIs they did not represent. Reputation is an important influence on student perceptions of PSEI quality. Study participants could readily name highly ranked Canadian institutions. They were well aware that these schools were absent from the range of schools their agents recommended. Many respondents expressed frustration with the limited options their agents made available. Two respondents reported that their agents represented only one PSEI.

Khalid (Graduate student, Pakistan, GLU) understood why top-ranked PSEIs were not

among the list of schools his agent promoted. “The universities agents represent are not highly ranked. The top ranked schools don’t concern themselves with agents.” Jack (Graduate student, India, GLU) knew that many universities had opened admissions offices in India, including Grant Lawrence University. Elite universities did not, however. He ticked off a list of highly ranked Canadian universities that hadn’t opened facilities to support recruitment activities. “Really good universities don’t have offices.” Li Na (Graduate student, China, GLU) suspected that elite universities likely preferred that students not apply through an agent. “If you really want to apply for some genius school, an agency is not a good choice. Good schools want your C.V. or letters of recommendation to be unique.” Li Na refers here to the widespread agent practice of composing personal statements and other supporting materials on their clients’ behalf (Bartlett & Fischer, 2011). “An agency writes a lot of letters of recommendation for their clients and these letters are often quite similar. Because that saves them time and money.” An admissions office might receive several such applications—processed by the same agency—and disregard the lot, with the applicants never realizing what their agent had done.

Agent contracts commonly include a clause stipulating a refund in the event the student is not admitted to any of the schools the agent recommended. As a risk-management strategy, agents often encourage their clients to apply to PSEIs with open/low admissions standards. This may increase the possibility of undermatching, particularly given how limited the agent’s range of PSEI options generally is. Li Xia (Graduate student, China, GLU) recognized this as an agent tactic to reduce their risk. “You have limited choices when using an agent,” she explained. “They only recommend two to four universities and you cannot choose others.” She believed her agent did this to limit the possibility of issuing a refund. “The more universities you apply for, the more risk they take on. They would be responsible if you aren’t admitted and would have to give

you back your money." Chao (Graduate student, China, GLU) had a different theory. He thought agents recommended PSEIs will low admissions standards to burnish their reputations for successful placement. If true, this also increased the risk of student undermatching.

> Agencies are companies and they have to make money. They may be in danger if they cannot successfully help a student apply for university. If they are unsuccessful, their students will tell others and that will get them a bad reputation. If they want to get a good reputation, they have to get high rates of successful applications. So perhaps they will choose some universities that are not that hard to get into. If your strength is ten, they may choose a university for you that has a strength of eight.

Even Amina (Undergraduate student, Pakistan, GLU)--whose agent was an extended family member—found her selection of PSEIs constrained. She dreamed of attending Langside or Estabrooke—two highly ranked universities in cosmopolitan cities. "I couldn't apply to those schools. She didn't represent Langside. She represented only six universities that were in much smaller places. I was very restricted as to where I could apply." Amina was underwhelmed by the range of schools her agent offered. "They offered the program of study I wanted, but they weren't highly ranked. If you go by rankings, it's Chittenden, it's Dunn-Barton, it's Estabrooke, it's Langside. She didn't deal with any of those."

Limited options also increased the likelihood of mismatch. Ying (Undergraduate student, China, Stites C.) had earned a bachelor's degree in English and was working at a language school in China. She was initially interested in graduate programs in the U.K. It was December by the time she contacted an agent. Her agent persuaded her that time was of the essence, Canada was a more suitable destination, and that she should apply to Stites College for a diploma in culinary management. Deeply unhappy with the outcome of her search, Ying fumed at the memory. "Why would he recommend a chef program to me?" Li Na's (Graduate student, China, GLU) agent represented only two Canadian PSEIs. She didn't see the point in discussing her

goals with him. “The schools he offered were so limited. It was really just this one school. That’s why I didn’t talk much about my goals.”

Two respondents reported that their agent only represented one PSEI. Susan (Undergraduate student, Pakistan, Ford C.) hired an agent after she arrived in a large Canadian city. She spotted the agency’s ad in a local newspaper. The agent promptly persuaded her to apply to Ford College, a for-profit career college. In reflecting on the experience, Susan described how applying on her own would have resulted in additional, more convenient options.

> The disadvantages of using an agent are that they only have one or two colleges. If you apply by yourself, you can go to any college in the city. Ford College is very far from my home. If I travel by road, it’s a 40 to 45 minute drive. If I use transit, it takes about one and a half hours. If I had applied by myself and I had more options, I might have gone to Hall College, which is very near to me. It’s about twenty minutes by transit and ten minutes by car.

Omolara’s (Undergraduate student, Nigeria, Everitt-Rollins C.) agent also only represented one school, but she wasn’t bothered by the situation. “I didn’t know anything about other schools, and since I’ve been in Canada, I’ve not learned of any other schools that interest me. So I don’t regret him just choosing Everitt-Rollins College for me.”

Not all agents work on commission. The range of universities that Li Qiang’s (Graduate student, China, Langside U.) agent recommended seemed in response to his client’s interest in attending an elite, highly ranked institution in a cosmopolitan city. “The asked me what kind of university I want. I said the peak one. You know, the better, the better, right?” With the agent’s help, Li Qiang applied to seven universities before accepting an admission offer from Langside. It is unclear how atypical Li Qiang’s experience was as he was the only Langside student to participate in the study. More information is needed about the experiences of students who used agents to help them apply to elite universities that do not pay agent commissions.

Agents steer students to colleges. Eleven respondents (nine with previously earned bachelor's degrees and two with advanced degrees) reported that their agents encouraged them to apply to colleges. Their agents told them they lacked the money, grades, test scores, and fluency in English to be admitted to Canadian universities, or that their goals (usually immigration-related) were better served by applying to college. This scenario provides a particularly stark example of misalignment between agents' and clients' best interests (the agency dilemma). While four of these respondents disregarded the recommendation and found other agents to help them apply to university, seven accepted the agent's recommendations, applied, and enrolled at Canadian colleges.

Omolara's (Undergraduate student, Nigeria, Everitt-Rollins C.) father was initially opposed to her studying abroad. As her cousin and a close friend were going as well, her father relented and agreed to allow Omolara to go. She had thrived in high school and assumed she was bound for university. When she and her family met with their agent, Omolara learned the agent had different plans.

> When the agent first told us that we were going to college, we disagreed. Initially, we doubted him. We thought perhaps he doesn't know what he's saying or doing. We didn't trust him. So we looked for someone else. I talked to my mom. I told her we don't want this agent anymore. He is telling us that we must go to college, but my cousin has already been to university. So how come she must go to college? Why can't she go to university? My mom said, "University? Do you have the money for university? We don't have the money. We only have the money for college because university is expensive." My mom tried to convince us that we don't have the money for university. It's very expensive. So we have to go to college. It's like the same thing as university in our country. So we have to go to college. Then we started trusting him.

Annual tuition and fees for international students at Everitt-Rollins College (Omolara's school) totals approximately C$14,500 (US$13,300), an amount equal to or higher than the tuition and fees many Canadian universities in all regions of the country currently charge international

students (AUCC, 2014). While international student tuition rates at universities in the metropolitan region where Omolara attends college are all higher than the tuition at Everitt-Rollins, in most cases the cost difference is approximately C$4,000 (US$3,674)—not an insignificant amount, but possibly not the barrier that Omolara's mother thought it was.

Jack (Graduate student, India, GLU) recalled a painful experience while attending an agency-sponsored seminar. He asked the agent leading the seminar about the likelihood of his securing admission to a graduate program in Canada. "I told her I'd earned a first class distinction in engineering and I have a good IELTS score. She told me in front of twenty or twenty-five people, 'You can't get into a Canadian university. It's too hard for you.'" Jack found what the agent said and the public way she said it very distressing. "At that moment, I literally broke down. I believed that it must really be hard to get into a Canadian university." Jack decided to reality-test what he'd been told. He went to several other agents before finding one who assured him admission to graduate school in Canada was possible. Jack remembered feeling grateful and relieved. "I have been very lucky in this process. I spent my money wisely." The outcome could have been far worse. Jack's friend Akaash had completed the same degree in production engineering. Like Jack, he was also interested in graduate study abroad but his agent instead recruited him into a diploma program at a Canadian college.

> He was recruited into a drafting program. That's really the lowest level of engineering. After becoming engineers, we rarely make designs. We approve designs. We're at the top of the ladder. We never put our hands on the drafts. It's the kind of work we did as students, but it's not the type of job that we do after graduation. That's what he went for, and now he's in a very bad position. I just talked with him two days ago. He was very worried about his future. He thinks it would have been better if he had stayed in India instead of coming to Canada.

Jack knew many other Indian friends facing similar circumstances. "I have a lot of friends from home who came here, earned diplomas, and they've ended up nowhere. They were good

engineers in India, but according to Canadian standards they're only diploma-holders." Jack's uncle—also an engineer—predicted that Jack's friends would have a difficult time finding positions commensurate with their skills. "If Akaash applies for his engineering license, the review committee will thank he lacks the potential to become an engineer because he went for a diploma," Jack explained. "It will be very hard for him to get his P.Eng license now." He felt badly for his friend, and relieved that he avoided his friend's fate. "I think I'm in a better position right now, as compared to him. It was a tough process for me, but everything went pretty well. I was lucky."

Jack suspected that agents stood to make higher commissions from colleges. In fact, Jack believed the universities did not pay commissions to agents at all. It was the only plausible rationale he could find to explain his observations.

> I would say that colleges pay agents around two thousand dollars per student to recruit them. When I get an admission offer and I accept and pay my fees, that college gives like two to three thousand dollars to the agents. But the universities don't pay anything to the agents. That's why you find more Indian students in colleges than in universities. Agents tell students that we can never get an admission to university. They tell us that university is too hard. And that's how they misguide people. But I was lucky in that I had friends here in Canada and they guided me. And I was very lucky that I found a consultant who guided me very well. He told me never go to colleges.

"There was a time when I didn't think I could get an offer of admission from Grant Lawrence University," remembered Aditya (Graduate student, India, GLU). "Or from any university in Canada." Like Jack, Aditya had a bachelor's degree. He was interested in graduate study abroad, but found his agent determined to send him to college. "The agent didn't guide me properly. They were only concerned with making money. They sent their clients with bachelor's degrees to colleges that cost as much as universities do." Aditya initially knuckled under. He applied to three colleges with the agent's help and was accepted. A talk with his uncle changed

everything, however. He pointed out that a master's would count for more than a diploma and encouraged Aditya to hold out for a university. Aditya found another agent who told him about Grant Lawrence. Aditya's uncle consulted his circle of friends with experience in Canada. They'd heard of GLU and heard it was a good university. Aditya applied and was admitted. He inferred from his experience that colleges paid higher commissions than universities did. "They are getting a good amount from colleges, as compared to universities. If you recruit one student to a college, the college will pay ten percent of your annual fee. Agents were just making easy money by sending people to colleges."

Aarav (Graduate student, India, GLU) had the same impression of his agent. "He earns 50,000 rupees (approximately US$833, or C$888) for each student that goes to college. So he tries to persuade everyone to apply to college. I told him I wanted to go to university, but he tried to change my mind every time." Aarav sympathized with his agent's motives. "He's all business, I know. He acts how I would in his place. But there are disadvantages to using an agent. You might not get the correct information. They can manipulate the information they provide you."

All study participants readily associated both affordances and limitations with agent use. They learned about agents through stories, advice, and recommendations provided by reference group members. From this information, they concluded that agent involvement was preferable to applying on their own. They believed that agents could use their experience and connections to deliver a speedy outcome that met their clients' needs. They also knew to be cautious. Anecdotal stories from peers suggested that agents often put their own interests above that of their clients. Agents offered an extremely limited range of schools, putting students at risk of undermatching or mismatching. In South Asia, agents routinely steered students with bachelor's degrees to colleges, insisting they lacked the credentials to apply to university. Some resisted this advice

and found other agents willing to help them apply to graduate programs. Others acceded and enrolled in colleges, earning credentials one or two levels below the qualifications they already held. Three respondents with bachelor's degrees (two of whom also have master's degrees) are enrolled in diploma programs, while three others are completing post-baccalaureate graduate certificates. This hints at the frequency with which agents successfully redirect their clients. I explore this in greater detail in the following section.

While the information that reference group members provided put respondents on their guard, it didn't provide a strategy for overcoming the advantage that agents hold. *Agency dilemma* theory describes a power asymmetry between agent and principal (client), making it difficult for the principal to be sure the agent is acting in his or her best interests. Respondents lacked deep knowledge about postsecondary education in Canada and the application process. It's why most of them chose to hire an agent. This lack of knowledge made it difficult for students to gauge the accuracy and salience of the advice their agents provided. Even as many students hired agents to manage search-related logistics or as a timesaving strategy, agents ultimately exercise significant influence over student choice-making.

Theme Three: Agents As A Pivotal Reference Group Influencing Student Choice Making

Parents, extended families, and peers catalyze, encourage, support, and inform student interest in study abroad during the predisposition stage. Initial student goal orientations emerge through dialogue with their reference group networks. Agents do not emerge as a significant reference group until the *search* stage. By the time that students progress to the *choice* stage, agents' influence has become as significant as parents and has eclipsed the influence of peers. Thirteen of 23 respondents named agents as a primary influence on their choice of target institution.

Respondents cited recommendations from reference group members, agent advertising, and agency reputation as factors influencing agency selection. Just as students tended to "connect the dots" when assessing agent value, they made similar inferences when evaluating an agency's reputation or success rate. An agency with multiple locations must have a high placement rate, otherwise how could they have expanded? An agent with offices located in a prestigious business district must treat his or her clients well, otherwise how could they be so profitable? Fourteen of 23 respondents said they learned about their agent through an advertisement. Students encountered fliers in campus buildings, ads on the radio and in newspapers, paid listings on Internet search engines, and notices on social media websites.

It is not clear to what extent agent involvement results in *undermatching,* in which students enroll in schools for which they are academically overqualified. Since agents typically represent less-selective institutions, academically talented students who use agents are unlikely to learn about schools more suited to their abilities. Beyond the commissions they earn, undermatching may benefit an agent in other ways. Persuading a client to apply to at least one PSEI with low or open admissions reduces the possibility of a refund. It can also contribute to higher placement rates, which can burnish an agency's reputation. For their part, students unsure of how they will fare abroad may prefer a less rigorous institution.

Even as academic, career, and personal goals drive student interest in education abroad, academic goals are often secondary to personal and career goals. Twenty one of 23 respondents described securing work authorization and PR as a motivating factor. This goal was top of mind when students chose a destination country and evaluated PSEIs and programs of study. Respondents were often willing to subordinate academic goals if they believed doing so advanced career and personal objectives. Some were persuaded to apply to programs unrelated

to their areas of expertise or interest. Others gave up an interest in graduate studies and enrolled in diploma or certificate programs instead. Not all respondents were as willing: engineering students were the most resistant to changing disciplines. While their responsiveness to academic goals varied significantly, agents consistently engaged the career and personal goals that drove students' interest in going abroad. Their success in delivering an outcome that satisfies these primary goals both produces student satisfaction with the search outcome overall and compensates for dissatisfaction with institutional or program fit.

How students identified and selected an agent. Respondents first learned about their agent from a variety of different information sources. In this section I identify and describe the most common referral sources that influenced agent identification and selection.

Recommendation from family and friends. Respondents frequently solicited referrals from their primary reference group networks. Thirteen of 23 respondents reported soliciting recommendations from friend and family. Students sought some kind of assurance that the agent they chose would treat them well and get the job done. They found recommendations from people with first-person experience helpful and predictive. Respondents' parents were active in leveraging personal and professional connections to identify prospective agents. Three students reported that their parents took the lead in selecting their agent.

Murad (Graduate student, India, GLU) wanted to find an agent experienced with North American graduate programs in engineering.

> I talked to some friends and they recommended an agent to me. This agent is an engineer himself, so he has good knowledge of universities, how they are rated, and everything. Many of my friends had hired this agent and gotten into good universities. They said the process was very smooth for them. So these were the two factors: my friends told me he is very knowledgeable about universities in the U.S. and Canada, and they gave him positive reviews. That's why I went to that particular agent.

Jack (Graduate student, India, GLU) came from a small town in India. “People there don’t know very much about universities abroad, and we don’t have good agents there,” he explained. “I had a lot of friends studying in a nearby city. I called some of them and they gave me the name of an agent—one of the most popular consultants in that city.” Li Qiang’s (Graduate student, China, Langside U.) mother used her connections to find him an agent. “Her friend’s daughter has a friend who works for an agency. My mum got me connected with that friend, and that’s the agent we chose.” Other respondents’ parents also used their connections. Vivaan’s (Graduate student, India, GLU) mother—a teacher—recommended an agent to him that many of her students had used to go abroad.

Li Na’s (Graduate student, China, GLU) parents had agreed to pay her agent fee, so she asked her father to take the lead in choosing her agent. “He went online, found an agency, and called them. He asked about the fee, how the process worked, and what guarantees they offered. I think he was afraid that I might fail.” Chao’s (Graduate student, China, GLU) mother chose her son’s agent. “Some of her colleagues’ children had studied abroad, so she got advice from them. She also found a few agencies on the Internet based on their popularity and finally choose the one I used.” Chao was grateful for his mother’s assistance. “I always trust my mom because she is a very good woman. She helped me so much. She's very smart and has always made great decisions for me, my father, for herself, and for our family. I totally trust her.”

Agent reputation. Just as students use reputation as shorthand in ascertaining institutional quality and value, they also consider reputation when identifying a prospective agent. Murad (Graduate student, India, GLU) advised paying whatever it took to hire an agent with a reputation for success.

Trying to choose an agent? I would say that money is not an important factor. You can

> screw up your career just to save a hundred dollars. So don't look at the price. Look at what he offers and consider how successful he has been with students and how friendly he is with them. What is his success rate of getting students into good universities, helping them with their documents and all that? If he can get the job done, then he is good.

Respondents in several top sending countries often used words like *famous* or *popular* to describe agent qualities they considered desirable. Lacking a means of objectively measuring agent value, they inferred that fame and popularity were the result of quality service and a high placement rate. "Fame" often meant that the agency operated a regional or national network of centers—again, a marker of prosperity and success. Zhang Min (Graduate student, China, GLU) said her friends worried about being cheated by their agents, so they looked for agencies that were famous, or who had been recommended by friends and family. "They choose famous agents. Or if the agent successfully helped their friends or family, they will choose this agent." When asked what she meant by famous, she explained.

> If the agency is big and they have branches in other cities, I will believe they are good and won't lie to you. If they lie to their clients or can't help them get admitted, there will be negative comments about the company. I think our government will not allow them to do business.

Her assumption that government would intervene in response to agent misbehavior is likely misplaced. Agent activities in China are currently under-regulated at best, with proposals for a more robust system only at the proposal stage (Farrar, 2012).

Zhang Xiu Ying (Graduate student, China, GLU) recalled considering three agencies back in China. "They were all famous and have many locations in China." Li Na (Graduate student, China, GLU) made a very similar comment. "My friends recommended some agencies to me. They were all very big and very popular in China. They have several branches in almost every city." Subhash (Graduate certificate, India, Metcalfe C.) was satisfied with the agency he used. "It's a very famous institute which is certified. They have eighteen to twenty centers all

over India." Li Xia (Graduate student, China, GLU) recalled what attracted her to one agency's website. "It indicated that they were China's best agency, with many branches around China in each of the big cities." Aarav (Graduate student, China, GLU) was also drawn to an agency he considered famous. "They were very famous. They worked with the largest number of students of any agency in my city." Yasmin (Graduate student, Pakistan, GLU) reported that her friends were usually drawn to famous agencies. "There are some very famous consultancies in Karachi. They always go for those."

The agency Chao's (Graduate student, China, GLU) mother hired for him had multiple branches. She made initial arrangements at the branch near her home and then sent Chao to another location in the city where he attended university. When Chao arrived, he was impressed by its location and furnishings, concluding that they must be very successful.

> The agency is located in a very tall building downtown. When I went there, I thought it's not a very bad agency because the skyscraper where they are located is very high. It's downtown in a very big city. If you go to a company located in Manhattan, you assume the company is very good because of its location. If the company can afford this rent, it must be very good. When I met with the agents, I looked at the decor and the work environment and thought, OK, this is actually very good.

Agent advertising. Eleven of 23 respondents cited agent advertising—in newspapers, billboards, online, on the radio, and on campus fliers—as a factor influencing agent identification and selection. Advertisements typically included mention of immigration services, the destination countries they specialized in, or the institutions they represented. Agencies also often advertised upcoming seminars and workshops, often held in expensive hotels, done likely to reinforce an image of prosperity and success. These events provided students with opportunities to learn more about the agent's services, the range of available institutions, and how the process worked. They could also ask questions and schedule follow-up appointments.

When Aditya (Graduate student, India, GLU) decided it was time to find an agent, he opened up his local newspaper. "Agents had posted ads in the newspaper, so I selected two or three agencies and contacted them." Rahman (Undergraduate, Pakistan, Ford C.) recalled an especially memorable agent advertisement back home in Pakistan. "They use taglines. You see their ad when crossing the road: 'Your Final Destination is Canada'. [laughs] Then you turn the car towards their office. You meet them, and they make up your mind for you." Tashelle (Graduate certificate, Jamaica, Everitt-Rollins C. / Chang C.) was the only respondent to mention hearing an agency advertisement on the radio. "His ad mentioned the benefits of the various schools he represented. So I met with him to find out more. There may be more agencies in Jamaica but I didn't know about them." Jack's (Graduate student, India, GLU) father kept an eye out for agent advertisements when he read the newspaper. Jack had already met with a few agents but none were willing to help him apply to graduate programs. He was starting to get discouraged.

> My father was the one who told me about this agent. He spotted a small ad in the newspaper. He told me to go and check out this guy. I told him no, he's not a famous guy. Why should I check him out? He'll only tell me the same things everyone else is telling me. But my father insisted I go and check it out. So I went there one hot afternoon, and he was great. I got very lucky. I met him and everything worked out after that.

Rahman (Undergraduate student, Pakistan, Ford C.) used the Internet to find an agent. "I was searching online when an ad for Perry Associates popped up in my window. The ad mentioned they offered immigration services. I visited their website, then called them for a free initial assessment." Li Xia (Graduate student, China, GLU) recalled using Baidu, a Chinese search engine. "I used Baidu to look for an education agent and found one that said it was the top agency in China, so I contacted them."

Agencies also advertise seminars that function as open houses for prospective clients. At these events, agents introduce their services, describe the advantages of the destination countries or institutions they represented, and provide opportunities for students to ask questions and make appointments. Yasmin (Graduate student, Pakistan, GLU) recalled attending a number of these events when looking for an agent. "Every Sunday, agencies host seminars in five star hotels. It's like an orientation to the different universities. There are many different companies, like Golden Horizon and Perry Associates. I used to attend these seminars. That's how I came to know about them." Vivaan (Graduate student, India, GLU) also attended one of these seminars, held in a local library. "They had organized a session for various countries like Germany. It was an information session on the admissions process to various universities around the world. I went to that session and from there I approached their office." An advertisement also led Vivaan to his second agent. After his first agent provided unwilling to help him apply to graduate programs, Vivaan spotted an ad for another agency that mentioned its affiliation with Grant Lawrence University. He fired the first agent and hired the second. "I was about to tell them to apply to the colleges (as they'd recommended), but after I saw this other ad I told them I was going to drop their idea."

Zhang Min's (Graduate student, China, GLU) search for an agent started with the many fliers plastering her campus that she saw.

> Some agents posted their fliers at school. Sometimes they will offer a lecture there and tell students how their organization can help them get admitted to a university abroad. There are many advertisements posted. I called some of these agencies to ask for information about their fees, how they can help me write a personal statement and complete the forms. Then I chose two or three agents and went to their officers. They had a teacher there who asked for my information and provided me with information about the country or schools they represented. And then I chose the most famous agent. If an agent has had a lot of successful cases, I will choose them.

Agent engagement with student goals. Respondents had clear goals in mind when explaining why they wanted to study abroad. They were initially less clear about the best means of getting there, and so they hired agents to help them identify the best available options and apply. Most respondents discussed their goals with their agent. Agents generally used this information to match the student with an institution and program from the constricted range of options they represented. Students reluctantly accepted this reduced range, betting that agent involvement was worth this concession. In general, this bet paid off. Agents typically delivered outcomes that satisfied their clients' career and personal goals. While post-search student satisfaction with institutional and program fit varied, thirteen of 23 respondents indicated that they were satisfied with the search outcome overall and would recommend the agent they used to others.

The transaction between student and agent can be analogized to the exchange between a customer and an auto dealer. The customer wants to buy a vehicle but lacks information that could help them make an informed choice. The dealer has some of this information, but only about the brands she represents. When customer and dealer meet, their interests overlap but only modestly. The customer needs a vehicle and the dealer has vehicles to sell. In the initial conversation, the customer tries to discern whether the dealer has vehicles available that will meet their needs at an acceptable price point. The dealer inquires as to the customer's needs and preferences, but only to better target her sale pitch. A better match might be available elsewhere, but the dealer may be unaware of this, and would likely discourage the customer from looking elsewhere. A successful transaction must satisfy both customer and dealer. If the customer is happy with the deal and the vehicle, he may recommend the dealer to others. If he learns a more

suitable vehicle or a better deal had been available elsewhere, or concludes that the one he bought is poor, his level of satisfaction with the search outcome may decrease.

In this section I discuss the ways in which agents respond to their clients' academic, career, and personal goals. Given that only less-selective institutions typically employ agents, undermatching is a structurally determined outcome for academically talented students who employ commission-based agents. Respondents were remarkably tolerant of agent actions that resulted in institutional undermatching or mismatching. Their dissatisfaction with the institution or program to which they were recruited was mitigated by the pleasure they took in having settled in Canada with a clear path to PR. As most regarded education abroad as a means to that end, nearly any institution or program would have advanced that objective, making it easier for them to excuse or forgive their agents. The three respondents who considered themselves most mismatched nevertheless reported they were satisfied with the search outcome.

Academic goals. In general, commission-based agents attempted to persuade their clients either that the range of institutions the agent represents could satisfy their academic goals, or that completing a course of study that didn't satisfy those goals would nevertheless advance students' broader career or personal objectives. These agents worked to influence students to shift or abandon their academic goals to match the options the agent offered them. Students who followed their agents' recommendations risked the possibility of being undermatched or mismatched by their agents. In this section I review the factors that may encourage agent undermatching or mismatching and suggest why students sometimes conclude that this is in their best interests. I also describe the use of faculty members as agency recruiters, which both persuaded students that agents and the process were credible and made on-the-spot admission

decisions possible. Additionally, respondents had more holistic conversations about academic, career, and personal goals with faculty members than they did with agents.

Undermatching. One sure way for an agent to satisfy their client is to promise them an admissions offer. *Undermatching* (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009) refers to circumstances in which a student "enrolls at less-selective colleges than their academic qualifications suggest they could have attended" (Supiano, 2014). Current research on undermatching focuses on the experiences of low SES students in the United States. I use the concept here to describe a strategy commission-paid agents use to satisfy both their clients' interests and their own. International students arrive to the search process with varying grades, test scores, prior qualifications, and English proficiency. These measures determine to an extent the range of PSEIs to which they have a chance of securing admission. Some respondents had excelled as undergraduates (recall Jack's first class distinction in engineering and his solid IELTS score) and their command of English (as evident during interviews) was often excellent. Others reported difficulty with some subjects (recall Aarav's five backlogs). Some struggled to express themselves in English during interviews. All of these students turned to agents to help them identify a range of target institutions. While advising a middling student not to pin their hopes on admission to a highly selective university is surely in their interest, agents often misrepresented PSEI selectivity in order to shift student interests towards the range of less-selective schools they represented.

Amina (Undergraduate student, Pakistan, GLU) aspired to attend an elite university, but her agent didn't represent any of the schools she admired. Her portfolio included half a dozen middle-of-the-pack institutions in less well-known locations in Canada. "The admissions process is tough at the elite universities," Amina explained. "So my agent dealt with universities that

were a bit more lenient with their application processes." The first agent Zhang Xiu Ying (Graduate student, China, GLU) consulted tried to steer her away from an interest in Canada. "She told me that it is difficult for Chinese students to apply to Canadian universities." Undeterred, she found another agent with a specialization in Canada. Zhang Xiu Ying was very interested in Langside University. The school enjoyed a sterling reputation in China and was very well known there. When she mentioned Langside to her agent at their first meeting, he told her she was ineligible to apply. "They told me that the accounting program at Langside doesn't recruit international students. The accounting systems in Canada and China are quite different so they will not accept me." The agent had a ready alternative in mind—a master's program at Grant Lawrence. Zhang Xiu Ying's parents were dubious at first. "They wanted me to go to Langside, but when I told them that Langside didn't recruit Chinese students, they said that I can apply to Grant Lawrence instead." Zhang Xiu Ying chose to look on the bright side. "The climate is nice here and it isn't so far from where my uncle lives, so I can keep in touch with him." The website for Langside's graduate programs in accounting includes a page for international applicants, so it appears Zhang Xiu Ying never reality-tested the information her agent provided.

Zhang Min (Graduate student, China, GLU) was also interested in some of the highly ranked universities in Canada she and her friends had heard about back home, but her agent advised her to lower her expectations. "He told me that since the university I graduated from isn't famous, I'd have little chance of being admitted to a famous school." With his help, she applied to Grant Lawrence and Whitten—a less selective university in a different region of the same province. "I think he recommended the schools he did because they think I'll easily be admitted and the programs are a good fit for me." Li Xia's (Graduate student, China, GLU) got

similar advice from her agent. “He said that my undergraduate college may not make me suitable for a very famous university like Langside.” Li Na (Graduate student, China, GLU) noticed that low standards trumped any consideration of fit. “The agencies already recommend schools that may not be very suitable for you, but they’re easy to get admitted to.”

Not all respondents had the same experience of agent guidance. Soft-spoken and erudite, Chao (Graduate student, China, GLU) described how he and his agent co-developed a range of target institutions in a way that resembles the approach of a guidance counselor in the U.S. context.

> My agent asked me, “What kind of universities do you like? What major do you want to choose? What is your background?” Her advice is based on a combination of things: your strengths, your interests, and your background. It’s a combination. She asked me these questions and I answered them and told her what kind of universities I like. I have to say, though, that sometimes interest is not the only criteria. If it’s a very good university, perhaps tens of thousands of students apply every year and there’s a furious competition to get in. And at the time I wasn’t very competent. As an undergraduate, I studied but I didn’t focus on exams so my transcript is not very good. I knew that very clearly, so I thought perhaps I can select five universities. I can maybe choose one or two very good ones, a middle range one, and then one or two from the lower range. They have different levels. So my agent and I came up with the list.

Developing a range of target safety, middle, and reach schools would be a familiar exercise to many American high school students, but only two respondents reported receiving this kind of assistance from their agents. Chao only received an offer of admission from Grant Lawrence. He was reluctant to admit this during interviews and seemed at a loss to explain the outcome. “Perhaps the other schools didn’t get my application materials. Perhaps they didn’t receive my language test scores, certificates, or other things. It’s very sad.” Unwilling to wait until the next admissions cycle to try again, he accepted Grant Lawrence’s offer.

Li Qiang (Graduate student, China, Langside U.) was the only respondent who is enrolled at Langside, a highly selective university, and a dream school for many other students in the

study. Li Qiang began his search aiming very high. He told his agent he was only interested applying to the most highly ranked universities. They recommended that he reconsider his plan. "They told me that while I can always apply to top-notch schools, I also have to have a strategy. So they recommended a plan for how I should apply." With the agent's help, Li Qiang applied to seven universities—more than any other respondent. The list included both elite and middle-of-the-pack institutions. Li Qiang was offered admission to Langside, far and away his top choice school. While his experience makes him an outlier in this study, further exploration of the experiences of students who used non-commissioned agents is a promising area for future research.

On the other end of the selectivity continuum are institutions that outsource admissions decision making to their agents. Khalid (Graduate student, Pakistan, GLU) recalled a disquieting encounter at the first agency he approached. "The first time I met with them I asked how they could help me. They said, 'We'll give you an acceptance letter today. We'll print it out here so you can start your visa application.'" Further, the agent offered to create a student I.D. card on the spot for him. Khalid had done enough research on his own to be suspicious. "I knew this is not how it's supposed to be, but for a student applying on their own, they could easily be misled." He considered schools with a London address to be particularly suspect. "London has a problem inasmuch as there are universities operating in every house. They're just handing out degrees, and often they turn out to be fake. After five years you go back and there's no university there." Khalid went home to tell family and friends about the agent's offer. "They all agreed that it sounded [expletive]."

Agent contracts. Two other factors may also contribute to agent undermatching. Agent contracts often provide for some kind of refund if the student is not accepted into any of the

schools the agent recommended. Agents can avoid this outcome by ensuring that their clients apply to PSEIs with low/open admissions. Chao (Graduate student, China, GLU) applied to four ranked universities with his agent's help, but they insisted he apply to Grant Lawrence as well. "If all five of my applications fail, I can get my money back," he explained. "But if even one succeeds, I cannot." Students consent to this in part because they also hoped to avoid this outcome. No one relished the prospect of having to tell friends and family that all the schools to which they had applied had rejected them. Students with search-related time anxiety or who were apprehensive about what elite institutions might expect from them were also satisfied by speedy admission to a less competitive school.

Li Na (Graduate student, China, GLU) understood that applying to Grant Lawrence was of mutual benefit. "They can guarantee that I'll be admitted, so it's good for them. GLU's acceptance rate is 70%. That's very high. Besides, if they fail to get me admitted they must help me apply to other schools next year for free." Vivaan's (Graduate student, India, GLU) made him similar guarantees. They gave him a list of universities and asked him to select the ones that interested him. "When I chose these four, they told me they could secure admission letters to all four without any problems. And it happened. I got an offer from all four universities." Li Qiang's agent did not work on commission. They applied to seven universities on his behalf. This list included both highly ranked institutions as well as less competitive ones with lower standards of admission. The contract Li Qiang signed with the agency also included provisions for a refund. "If I'm not accepted by any of them, they'll return my money. So they don't want me to fail either. That's why they developed a strategy that is acceptable to me."

Agent reputation. Another factor that encourages agent undermatching is the importance students attached to agent reputation for successful placement as a selection criterion. Thirteen of

23 respondents cited this as a factor in agent identification and selection. Zhang Xiu Ying (Graduate student, China, GLU) raised the issue in her first meeting with a prospective agent. "I asked them if they had been successful in getting students admitted to university and what their experience was." Tashelle (Graduate certificate, Jamaica, Everitt-Rollins C. / Chang C.) did the same when she first met the agent she hired. "I asked him how reliable his service is and how many of his students got through the process." When asked during interviews how she defined a good agent, Li Xia (Graduate student, China, GLU) said, "An agent is good when many students use them and they are successfully admitted to the university they applied to and dream about." It is understandable why students would inquire about an agent's rate of successful placement, but this rate conveys no information about institutional or program fit.

Mismatching. Respondents also described being persuaded to apply to programs of study that poorly aligned with their interests and academic backgrounds. Recall Jack's (Graduate student, India, GLU) classmate, Akaash. On his agent's advice, Akaash enrolled in a diploma program at a college and graduated *less* qualified than if he had simply arrived in Canada with his Indian bachelor's degree. I use *mismatching* here to describe circumstances in which a student has enrolled in a program of study that does not match their professed academic or career interests, or previously earned academic qualifications. Some students resisted mismatching, as Jack had. Zhang Xiu Ying (Graduate student, China, GLU) was interested in master's programs in accounting, which very few universities in Canada offer. "My agent recommended I apply to the M.B.A. program at Watterson University (a less-selective university in Canada), but I don't think it's suitable for me. I just want to study accounting." Tashelle (Graduate certificate, Jamaica, Everitt-Rollins C. / Chang C.) had earned a B.S.N. in Jamaica. Her initial plan was simply to move to Canada and find a job. The agent she met with persuaded her that going to

school in Canada would provide for an easier transition. He recommended Everitt-Rollins College for her. “He told me it’s best if I go there because they offer courses that pertain to nursing. I didn’t want to study anything out of my range. I wanted to do something in nursing.” Her agent initially recommended a course in project management, but she told him no. “I had to be firm and tell him I wanted to do something within my field. I don’t know anything about that course! [laughs] So I preferred to do something else.” Instead, she enrolled in a graduate certificate program in health promotion.

Other respondents were more willing to shift their academic goals to align with their agents’ recommendations. Three respondents’ stories suggest a common agent tactic is to advise students to apply to programs of study with low admissions standards or faster turnaround time for admissions decisions, regardless of whether the program matches their academic interests. Amina’s (Undergraduate, Pakistan, GLU) agent talked her into applying for a program of study that didn’t interest her at all. She explained that Amina was likely to be admitted more rapidly to some programs than to others. She’d need an offer of admission to apply for a visa. So she recommended Amina apply for a program with a faster admissions turn-around time.

> She told me that the visa and application process is longer than before. So she said I should apply for sociology and then shift it after I arrived. When I came here, I was enrolled in sociology. That wasn't what I wanted to do, but she said she wanted my visa to come soon, right? If I apply to a program that's very tough to get into, it might take more time. Even though my grades were good, it still takes time. So that's why she made me apply to some other program. When I came here, I had to change it.

Amina did manage to change her major after she arrived. Others were not as lucky. Ying’s (Undergraduate, China, Stites C.) agent persuaded her to forgo pursuing a master’s degree in favor of a diploma program in culinary management.

> Stites College is famous for culinary management, so he recommended I apply for that program. But I was a teacher in China before coming to Canada. I knew nothing about

> hospitality. The agent assured me I could change my program after I arrived, and I believed him.

A strike by visa processing administrators in Canada delayed Ying's visa approval. By the time she got to Stites, the program to which she hoped to transfer had closed.

Omolara's (Undergraduate student, Nigeria, Everitt-Rollins C.) agent made the same pitch. "I told him I wanted a science course. He said they didn't have this kind of science course, so he chose hospitality management for me…He said I could change it when I got there." Her agent was similarly directive with regard to institution. "He chose Everitt Rollins College for me. I think Everitt Rollins College is the only school he does business with." To recap, in terms of options Omolara's agent offered her exactly one school and one program. She took his advice, applied, and started the program. "I didn't like the course at first. I argued with him, telling him that I didn't want it. He said I should just accept it for now and when I got there I could change the course." After arriving at Everitt-Rollins and starting classes, Omolara changed her mind. She found herself growing interested by some of the course material and began enjoying the course more and more.

*Faculty members as agency-affiliated recruiters***.** It's easy to see why students find the prospect of an instant admissions decision so appealing. At a minimum, it eliminates a waiting period that could otherwise last weeks or months. An offer in hand also allows students to initiate the visa application process. Providing on-the spot admissions decisions is a common recruitment practice for non-elite U.S. PSEIs (Haavik, 2003). It is less clear how widespread the practice is internationally. One PSEI mentioned by respondents—Grant Lawrence University—offered on-the-spot admissions to selected graduate programs in engineering. Four respondents reported that this was an important factor in their decision to apply to Grant Lawrence.

Khalid (Graduate student, Pakistan, GLU) learned about an upcoming agency-sponsored event, at which an engineering professor from Grant Lawrence would be on hand to make on-the-spot admissions decisions. He found this very appealing. “It was a very good recruitment technique for them to have an actual professor from the university there. Yeah, it affected me.” Even as he suspected a bait-and-switch, he scheduled an appointment. “I expected to find only agents there, but a professor was there as well.” Khalid was able to ask the professor questions about the course, the facilities, and job prospects after graduation. He found the faculty member informed and credible, and definitely more helpful than an agent would have been.

> I got to ask the professor about things agents typically wouldn’t know about. It was great to get face time with him, having him explain the course of study, guiding me, and asking me questions. That mattered to me. It was a major factor in my decision.

The professor reviewed Khalid’s application materials and conditionally admitted him on the spot, based on the results of his upcoming TOEFL test. For Khalid, the experience was very different from previous interactions with agencies. “The professor was more of a guide than an agent. He gave me my letter of authorization and explained how the visa application worked. Meeting with him was kind of comforting for me.”

Vivaan (Graduate student, India, GLU) had had a similar experience. When he learned that an engineering professor from Grant Lawrence was coming to his city to meet with students, he contacted GLU to confirm that this was a legitimate program. He made an appointment and went to speak with the professor.

> He patiently answered all my questions regarding the different engineering programs at Grant Lawrence. I asked him what the difference was between each program and which course he thought I should take. He was very patient and answered all my questions. I really appreciated his efforts. Even though there were a lot of students waiting to speak with him, he still took a lot of time to speak with me. At first he gave me admission to the mechanical engineering program. Then I asked him if I could change it to industrial

> engineering. He agreed to it and said, OK, fine, as you wish. He assured me that industrial engineering is a good course and wished me luck.

Like Khalid, Vivaan also discussed his career and personal goals with the professor. "He told me there are many industries in this area and assured me I could find a job in Canada because the economy is so strong right now." Vivaan also found the faculty member to be a credible representative, much more so than an agent. "If I had only met with an agent it would have made a difference. It would have involved more research for me. Instead I got to meet with an actual professor and I trusted the answers he provided." Not all students cottoned to the idea of on-the-spot admissions. Jack (Graduate student, India, GLU) found the prospect suspicious.

> It's weird that some schools give on-the-spot admissions. They just look at your transcripts and give you a decision. That's very weird. I wouldn't go for that type of school. I got an admissions offer like that and decided not to go there. If you can give someone a decision just like that, there is little chance the quality of the school will be all that good.

Ironically, Jack attends Grant Lawrence, which offered on-the-spot admission to Khalid. Vivaan, and many other students.

Career and personal goals. Students' career and personal goals drive their interest in education abroad. Agents are highly responsive to these goals, pitching the schools and programs they represent as a pathway to achieving them. In developing regulations that expedite work authorization and PR for graduates of Canadian PSEIs, policymakers are silent partners in these transactions. The opportunity to live and work in Canada becomes the product that agents pitch to their clients. They provided information about Canadian immigration law and policy, the visa process, what earning a specific postsecondary credential would earn them in the job market, and the likelihood of finding a job after graduation. Students used this information to settle on Canada as a destination country and a range of target PSEIs and programs of study.

Khalid (Graduate student, Pakistan, GLU) asked the faculty recruiter from Grant

Lawrence about his chances of finding a job in Canada after graduation. “I asked the professor, ‘If I graduate from your university, what are my chances of landing a good job? What are the career opportunities for me?” Chao (Graduate student, China, GLU) wondered about the same things. “My agent told me it’s easier to find a job in Canada than it is in Europe and America. As long as you get a good education, you can find a job easily.” She also discussed his options for immigration. “She told me Canada has a new policy. If I finish one year of postgraduate study, I can apply for immigration.” Yasmin’s (Graduate student, Pakistan, GLU) agents told her the same thing. “They told me that after completing my studies, if I want to settle down I can apply for a work permit. If I stay in Canada for a certain period of time, then I will get PR. They guided me in this regard also.” Ying’s (Undergraduate student, China, Stites C.) friend chose an academic program that his agent said would improve his chances of getting PR. “He wants to immigrate to Canada after his studies, so his agent recommended a program for him. He said this was a better choice for him if he wants to immigrate in the future.”

Jack’s (Graduate student, India, GLU) reasons for coming to Canada revolved around his interest in growing the family business.

> We have a real estate business. We’ve invested a lot in India. It’s a very good country but my father always thought that we should diversify our risk by transferring some of our investments to Canada. I took a business point of view of the opportunity to come here.

Jack’s plan was to graduate with his master’s degree, then apply for PR and ultimately Canadian citizenship. “Once you get your Canadian citizenship, you can easily start a business in the U.S.” He believed a Canadian passport would open the world to his family’s business back in India.

> If you have an Indian passport, you can't travel to any country without a visa. But if you have a Canadian passport, you can just go in and out of fifty or sixty percent of the countries, I think. So it would be very easy for me to just go into a country and meet people. If I want to be in an international trade, then it would be a very good thing for me to have a Canadian passport, as compared to an Indian passport.

Jack had thought all this through before meeting with his agent. “He was very knowledgeable. He told me about all the visa categories, like E1 and E2. He explained how I could get to the U.S. on a TN visa according to the NAFTA agreement. He worked out a whole plan for me.” Perhaps as importantly, Jack’s agent provided what he considered to be a realistic portrayal of life in Canada. “He told me that Canada isn’t how it looks from here. You can’t just go there and expect to earn a lot of money. You have to work your way up. You need to work very hard.”

Students arrive to their first meeting with an agent with a set of somewhat defined academic, career, and personal goals. Respondents’ stories suggest these goals may initially shaped more by push rather than pull factors (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). At the outset of the search, students aspired to move Somewhere Else, study at an institution Somewhere Else, in hopes of getting a job Somewhere Else, and ultimately settling Somewhere Else. Reference group networks assist students with goal development. When the time comes to hire an agent, they were also often a source of referrals. Agent advertising and perceived agent reputation were also influential in agent identification and selection.

Agents influenced their clients’ selection of Canada as the Somewhere Else to which they sought to go. Respondents’ stories provided examples of how agents responded to their academic, career, and personal goals. Commission-based agents used this information to tailor a pitch to their clients. Their objective is not to identify an optimal fit for the student’s aptitudes and interests. Rather, it is to persuade students that the programs and schools agents promote provide viable pathways to the lives they dream of in Canada. When successful, this strategy results in a reasonably satisfied client and a commission for the agent.

Respondents were often willing to amend their academic goals to align with the pathway their agent offered, with undermatching or mismatching a common outcome. Students were

persuaded to change disciplines, abandon hopes of admission to highly ranked schools, and enroll in programs at a level well below previously earned qualifications. While some students perceived a modest benefit to being undermatched, it was unquestionably in their agent's best interests. In South Asia, agent bias toward colleges (and presumably higher commissions) is so acute that some academically talented students reported difficulty in finding agents willing to help them apply to university. Agent interests may precipitate undermatching in other ways as well. They may direct students to apply to PSEIs with low/open standards of admission to limit the risk of a failed search (and a refund to the client). Agencies trade on their reputations, and a high placement rate is a significant factor in agent reputation. Steering clients towards schools where an admission offer is all but assured makes for happy clients and future referrals.

Two students who used non-commissioned agents had a different experience. They co-developed a target list of safety, midrange, and reach schools with their agents, based on a holistic reading of their goals, aptitudes. and interests. They each applied to several institutions (far more than any other respondent). Their stories most closely approximated the experiences of guidance counselor involvement in the U.S. college search process. Two others reported meeting with faculty members working as recruiters under the aegis of an agency. They found the faculty member's involvement helpful, encouraging, and a marker of credibility for the agency. These outcomes suggest that more research is needed into the experiences of students who use non-commissioned agents and the experiences of students who interacted with faculty as recruiters during the search process.

Theme Four: Students Reality-Test Agent Recommendations

Even as students hire agents to advise them, they often suspect the accuracy of the information they've been provided. Respondents reality-tested agent information using whatever

sources of information were available to them. The term *reality testing* is often used to describe different concepts across different contexts, disciplines, and settings. I use *reality testing* here to describe a strategy students used to verify agent advice by accessing alternate information sources. Respondents made clear that they knew they didn't know what they didn't know. They couldn't be sure of where facts left off and agent hyperbole began. They wondered whether the bright futures in Canada their agents promised were too good to be true. They doubted the expertise of consultants who provided detailed information about life, work, and study in Canada yet had never visited themselves. As Jack (Graduate student, India, GLU) explained: "You haven't been out of India. You have no idea what Canada is like and yet you're telling me how good life is there. How would you know that?" "Some of these agents sound super confident," recalled Khalid (Graduate student, Pakistan, GLU). "They've maybe left Pakistan once in their whole lives, but they make themselves sound as if they are the mayor of Canada." Li Wei (Graduate student, China, GLU) was also a bit dubious. "Agents don't know everything, but they talk like they do. In fact, many agents have never left China." "Initially, I trusted my agent one hundred percent," remembered Aarav (Graduate student, India, GLU). "Most students do." But after hearing friends' stories of agent misbehavior, doubts crept in. "I started to wonder if my agent had given me false information. From that point on, I didn't trust him completely. When he told me something, I'd go right home and search on the Internet."

With so much riding on a successful search outcome, students were often inventive and resourceful in leveraging the information sources available to them. They gathered what they could from their reference group networks. Family and friends living in Canada could pass along what they knew about different schools and communities. Students also made extensive use of the Internet. Certainly they visited institutional and consular websites but they also used social

media networks like Facebook and QQ to contact students from their home countries who studied at the universities their agents had recommended. In essence, respondents grew their reference group networks in an effort to get more and better data about specific institutions and regions. Students used these new connections both to reality-test what their agents had told them but also to ask about things they suspected their agent didn't know about, like the cost of living or what things to pack. Participants reported that the students they contacted were usually friendly, receptive to their requests, and willing to help.

Family and friends. Nearly all respondents reported reality-testing their agents' recommendations with parents, extended family, and peers. As in earlier stages of the search, reference group members contributed first-person experience or else helped connect students to others in the network who did. Even family and friends with no experience could be helpful as sounding boards. Students specifically wanted assurance that these were legitimate institutions that conferred a recognized degree. In some cases, a friend or family member had visited the school or community and could provide first-person information. Zhang Xiu Ying (Graduate student, China, GLU) had an uncle living in the same province as Grant Lawrence University. "He told me that a friend of his invited him to visit here several years ago. He said that the campus is beautiful and very good, so he supported the idea of coming here." Coincidentally, Aditya (Graduate student, India, GLU) also had an uncle living a few hours from the Grant Lawrence campus.

> He told me that he would ask his friends' advice. After he talked with them, he told me that Grant Lawrence is good, and that it's better to go to university than to college. I'll spend the same amount of money but end up with a master's degree rather than some college degree that won't be useful to me in the future."

Some respondents also reality-tested agent recommendations with family and friends in their home countries. Khalid (Graduate student, Pakistan, GLU) and his brother used the Internet to research Grant Lawrence University. “After meeting with the agent, my brother and I both did some research online about the degree and the university. We concluded it wasn’t a hoax.” Vivaan’s (Graduate student, India, GLU) agent recommended four Canadian universities. “I didn't have any knowledge about these universities, so I asked my friend. He made inquiries and told me that they are not top class but they are reputable universities. Employers would accept this degree, so it's safe to study there.”

Social media. Interestingly, seven respondents used social media like chat rooms, Facebook, and QQ (a Chinese instant messaging program) to contact and talk with current students at the PSEIs their agents recommended. Respondents described visiting chat rooms with names like “Chinese Students at Grant Lawrence University”, where they could ask questions and verify information the agent had provided. They also used social media to obtain information they couldn’t get through their agent. One student mentioned that he found talking to other students more comfortable and less intimidating than approaching faculty members. Others used these new connections to find prospective housemates and learn more about the communities in which these schools were situated. One student reported that the information current students provided directly influenced her selection of institution. In a very few cases, agents offered students a list of former clients now studying at the universities they recommended. In another case, a respondent asked for such a list, but found his agent unwilling to comply. Respondents consistently reported that the students they approached via social media were generally friendly, willing to help them, and able to provide information they considered useful and credible.

Malik (Graduate certificate, India, Everitt-Rollins C.) wanted to know about the cost of living in the region where Everitt-Rollins College (the school his agent recommended) was located. His agent provided some information, which he supplemented with projections on the Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) website, but he found this insufficient. “The agents just give you a screen shot of what your living expenses will be. The CIC website also describes the living expenses you can expect. But it's the students who actually live there and can tell you.” Malik didn’t know anyone at Everitt-Rollins, but he hit upon a strategy for finding people who could help him.

> It’s always best to validate the information agents give you with students who are already here. So what you do is go to Facebook and type the name of the college and then type common last names from my country. You get a few suggestions for people to contact. So I got a few suggestions. I looked at a few profiles and sent them a message, after first assuring them I am not some creepy guy! [laughs] Then I explained that I am applying to this college. I have to tell you these people were really happy to help.

Malik was particularly interested in learning more about what life was like at Everitt-Rollins, and what it cost. “I asked about daily life there, the kind of houses they live in, and what they have to spend to live there.” Their stories and their enthusiasm reassured him that he was making the right decision to move there. “One of the reasons I chose this school is that the people I connected with on Facebook said it was a good place.” Aarav (Graduate student, India, GLU) also used Facebook to expand his reference group network. He found a Facebook group page called “Study in Canada 2012-13”, joined the group, and started conversations with some of the other members. “I went there to get information from students like me. Some were applying for Canada and others were already there. They advise others like me who are applying for admission. I got so much information from this group.”

Li Na's (Graduate student, China, GLU) agent also recommended GLU to her. Not knowing anyone there, she used QQ—a popular instant messaging program in China, similar to AIM or MSN Messenger—to find Chinese students at GLU. "I searched for 'Grant Lawrence University 2013' and found a chatroom with perhaps a hundred students there." She joined the chatroom, explained she was applying to GLU, and started asking questions. "I asked if anyone had the same major as me. I asked about the school, the life there, the workload, and exams. It's very convenient, a smarter way, right?" The students she chatted with didn't sugarcoat their answers. "They told me the campus is in a pretty small city. If you want to go shopping or have fun, you wouldn't choose to go there. It's a bit boring, in fact. But you'll have a lot of time to study, because there's nothing to do except study!"

Li Na's agent also represented Whitten University. Located in a different region of the province, Whitten was roughly comparable to Grant Lawrence in size, program offerings, and selectivity. Li Na also went looking for Whitten students on QQ. When she found them, they painted a highly unflattering picture. "One guy at Whitten said, 'Don't come here!'," she recalled, laughing. "I asked him, 'Why? You are studying there!' He told me it's very poor there. Their university only has one building! He said that the city nearby is also really poor. The one advantage is that it's near a big city." Sleepy Grant Lawrence suddenly got a lot more appealing. Li Na decided that her studies wouldn't leave her much free time, so living near a big city wouldn't matter quite so much. She dropped Whitten and enrolled in GLU.

Khalid (Graduate student, Pakistan) spent time both in chatrooms and on Facebook. Like Malik, he found a Facebook group page dedicated to Pakistani graduate students in Canada. "That's the general page where we can go to talk about stuff," he explained. "For example, I can post that I'm considering a master's program in engineering or psychology or whatever, and

eventually someone might reply with, 'OK, I went through this. I am taking this course.'" As friendly as people were to him, Khalid reported that it wasn't always easy to find people with the knowledge and insight he needed.

> Sometimes it's not at all useful. Once or twice you might find someone who is dedicated and interested in helping you. But most of the time, the people there don't know much because they're new students. What you need is someone who has been here for at least a year so he or she can properly guide you.

Khalid did end befriending someone in a chatroom who became his roommate when he got to Grant Lawrence. "He helped me a lot with regard to how I should prepare. Coming to a different country all alone is a challenge. You even need help with your packing. You need other people to tell you about this stuff."

In theory, agents themselves should be useful referral sources for students looking to connect with peers at prospective schools. In practice, some were willing and others weren't. Zhang Xiu Ying (Graduate student, China, GLU) reality-tested what her agent had told her about GLU in an online chat room. "I was trying to find students at Grant Lawrence who were in the same program. When I found them, I asked about life at the university, their academic experiences, the cost to attend, and whatever other ideas and advice they had." Her agent also offered to connect her with former clients who were now at GLU. "I was able to connect with them online and ask for help and advice. They have been quite helpful for me." One of Jack's (Graduate student, India, GLU) agents was not as forthcoming. He had urged Jack to apply to college, not university. When Jack asked him to be put in touch with students the agent had recruited to college, he demurred. Jack suspected he knew why.

Let me talk with any of the students they sent to Canada. Just give me their numbers. That's what I told the agent. I want to know about these students' experience. But they never gave me anyone's number. They knew that if they had, I would find out that the colleges are no good.

Because eventually everyone comes here. And that's when they find out that the colleges are no good.

PSEI websites. Students often visit the websites for institutions their agents recommend. As Zhang Min (Graduate student, China, GLU) recalled, "Whenever my agent suggested a school I looked for more information on my own online." Sixteen participants specifically said they visited institutional websites to reality-test the information their agents provided. They described doing this for three reasons. First, they wanted to verify the institution's legitimacy. Second, they wanted to confirm program information like tuition, fees, and housing. Third, they wanted to learn more about the surrounding community and region. Not all students did this. Recall that Zhang Xiu Ying apparently never visited Langside's website. If she had, she would have learned that the program she wanted accepted international students (contradicting what her agent told her).

Aditya (Graduate student, India, GLU) believed that information gleaned from an institutional website was more credible. "It's more trustworthy because there's no chance to be confused. Everything is every straightforward and transparent so you can figure everything out very easily." Vivaan (Graduate student, India, GLU) was very curious about Belmont, the industrial city where Grant Lawrence is located. He especially wanted to know more about the regional economy and what his chances were for finding a job there after gradation. "I learned there are many companies in Belmont that supply the big companies, so there will always be opportunity here." Aditya (Graduate student, India, GLU) had received an on-the-spot admissions offer from Grant Lawrence, but his friend urged caution. "He had some doubts. I mean, how could I have gotten admitted to a graduate program at university with a 3.0 GPA? I remember him telling me to crosscheck it. It's such a huge investment, so it's better to be sure." He spent quite a lot of time on GLU's website. "I reviewed the projected tuition and fees. I could

easily crosscheck everything I'd been told. I was satisfied, yes."

Khalid (Graduate student, Pakistan, GLU) worried about being taken advantage of. He had friends whose agents recruited them to sham institutions in the U.K. "The names of the universities, they are so grand that you think that they must be right next to Oxford," he explained. "But really, all you need to do is search on the Internet. You'll find out." He developed a web search strategy to reality-test some of the institutions he'd heard about.

> I used to take their name and put "hoax" after them when searching on Google. Many times I found out there is a debate going on about the legitimacy of these universities. And many people who attend these schools will say that yeah, the classes are not that good, the professors are not that good. And maybe they are not even real professors.

Li Na had her own search strategy for using the Internet to verify the information her agent provided. She found that when she searched for "Grant Lawrence University" in Chinese using Chinese search engines, the results largely consisted of paid listings by agencies operating in China. "Maybe 99% of the results that pop up are from the agencies," Li Na explained. Instead, she used Google and typed the keywords in English. The results directed her to websites affiliated with GLU. "I found Grant Lawrence University's website. I found a lot of information about our campus: international student services, campus life. I clicked on each link. They were all very detailed." Like Khalid, Murad (Graduate student, India, GLU) worried about being talked into enrolling at an unaccredited university. "I had a few friends studying abroad but they were in the U.S.," he explained. "They did not know anything about Canada. So I did my research online, looking for websites where I could find information on Canadian universities." Eventually, Murad's search turned up a website that he perceived to be affiliated with the Canadian government. This site included a listing of Canadian PSEIs, which included Grant Lawrence University. "These universities are very authentic. They're not made up. They are

listed in reports that are published by the Government of Canada, which you can believe in." Reassured by what his Internet search turned up, Murad applied to Grant Lawrence with his agent's help.

Khalid (Graduate student, Pakistan, GLU) used GLU's website to research and contact professors in his program. "Every department has its own page. I emailed a few of the professors, asking about their research. I guess that influenced my decision to choose Grant Lawrence." Khalid was one of only two respondents that contacted professors at the schools they were considering. He theorized that many students preferred to solicit peers via social networks because they found professors intimidating. "People don't approach the faculty directly. The problem is that they are intimidated by the faculty—especially international students. Because of this, they never consider contacting professors directly. They'll ask everyone else around them but the faculty."

Domestic students undoubtedly use many of the same strategies respondents described, but for somewhat different reasons. Domestic students might use social media, ask friends and family, or visit an institutional website to gather more information about a prospective college or university. Study participants also wanted more information, but they wanted it in part to reality-test information their agents had provided them. They felt it necessary to crosscheck agent information because the stakes seemed so high. Specifically, they feared investing time and money in an institution of dubious quality that conferred unrecognized credentials. When their reference group networks couldn't deliver the information they wanted, some respondents took steps to expand them via social media. This was a creative response to the problem and it usually paid off. Respondents described building new connections with peers at the schools they wanted to learn more about. One respondent used the information she gathered to eliminate a school

from consideration. Another found a roommate and a helpful source of practical information as he prepared to move to Canada. It could be argued that both hiring an agent and using social media are both responses to sparse reference group networks that lack the information, insight, and expertise that international students need to make an informed choice.

Theme Five: Student Satisfaction With Search Outcome Does Not Rely On Institutional Fit

While academic, career, and personal goals drive student interest in going abroad, career and personal goals – specifically, an interest in work authorization and PR – are generally the most important to them. All 23 participants reported progress towards this common set of goals: an academic experience at an accredited institution leading to a recognized credential, work authorization, and ultimately PR. Since all respondents were currently enrolled (one of the selection criteria) none had progressed to full-time employment or spent enough time in Canada to apply for PR. As such, student responses to questions about satisfaction began with the schools to which they had been recruited.

Agent involvement produced a range of outcomes with regard to institutional fit. Two students who used noncommissioned agents reported that their interest, aptitudes, and preferences drove institutional selection. Both applied to several institutions, more than any other study participant. Commission-based agents only discuss the institutions they are contracted to represent, excluding all but a handful of schools. This makes consideration of type, size, location, facilities, strengths, and other criteria determining fit much less possible. Students who used commission-based agents expressed frustration with this limited choice of schools. They reported much less involvement in institutional selection, and were more likely to report undermatching or mismatching. Nevertheless, nearly all respondents expressed satisfaction with the search outcome.

This result is possible because of student willingness to subordinate academic goals once convinced that doing so will advance their career and personal goals. Agents make this pitch to persuade them that a degree from one of their client institutions offers a clear path to a job and PR. Since the limited range of schools they represent cannot accommodate all student academic goals, agents coax students into shifting their interests to better match the programs available. They went about this in a variety of ways. Some convinced clients interested in graduate programs they lacked the grades, test scores, and English needed for university. They persuaded students interested in highly ranked schools to reconcile themselves to less selected institutions. Some provided partially accurate or inaccurate information to steer their clients towards the institutions they represented. The fewer the options available, the more acute the mismatch often was. Since 21 of 23 students reported satisfaction with the search outcome, this suggests a tolerance for outcomes that misaligned with their academic goals, provided they included a clear path to work authorization and PR. Degree of misalignment could also be predictive of student satisfaction. For example, students whose agents redirected them to lesser selective schools that nevertheless offered the programs of study that interested them and adequate facilities reported greater satisfaction than those who were enrolled in programs that did not match their interests or previously earned qualifications.

Agent satisfaction requires earning a commission in exchange for successfully recruiting a student. This is non-negotiable for agents. All successfully concluded transactions between agent and student result in a commission for the agent, thus agent satisfaction is produced. Students persuaded that this outcome also advanced their interests reported satisfaction even if it resulted in undermatching or mismatching. Becker's (1960) side-bet theory may help account for respondents' satisfaction. He theorized that a person who commits to action in service of a

desired outcome (the "main bet") deepens their commitment when he or she makes other decisions (the "side bet") that depend on winning the main bet to succeed. For international students, landing a well-paying job after graduation, securing PR or citizenship, and supporting parents may be "side bets" that succeed if and when the student successfully graduates from a Canadian PSEI (the "main bet"). With so much depending on their finding success in Canada, students may feel that dissatisfaction with institutional fit is not an option.

Satisfaction with institution. Respondent reflections on their experiences often had them sounding like their North American counterparts. They had navigated a challenging process, faced tough decisions, and made choices they hoped were the right ones. And now, having arrived, settled in, made friends, and grown familiar with campus, these successes led many respondents to conclude they had chosen well, even if the school had not been their first choice. Li Wei (Graduate student, China, GLU) liked Grant Lawrence a lot. It was a verdant and peaceful place where she could focus on her studies. "It's quiet and safe. I don't need a lot of diversions. I'm a very quiet person and I study a lot. I can just come here, study, graduate, and go back to work. That's very important for my family." Li Xia's (Graduate student, China, GLU) parents worried that she wasn't capable of managing on her own. She was pleased to have proved them wrong. "They always thought I should be more independent. Before coming to Canada, I wondered myself how well I would adjust. But after I came, I made new friends and we get on well. The teachers are good here and really helpful."

Malik (Graduate certificate, India, Everitt-Rollins C.) was equally pleased with his experience at school. "Yes, the institution is good. The services are good. They have a lot to offer. It's nice. It's definitely nice." Vivaan (Graduate student, India, GLU) started the search process very late, but managed to secure an on-the-spot admissions offer to Grant Lawrence. In

reflecting on his experience, Vivaan couldn't believe his good fortune. "I'm really very satisfied. Two months after starting this process, I got an offer of admission. By January, I was in Canada. Everything went well, without any obstacles. And I have no complaints at all about life in Canada." Li Na (Graduate student, China, GLU) had worried about being recruited to a fraudulent institution. Taking on an agent represented a trust fall for her. She was relieved when she arrived and discovered she hadn't been misled. "I'm satisfied with the agent's recommendation. Because after I came here, I found this school is very nice. It's *real*, just like the agent said. It's real. [laughs**]** I'm very satisfied with how everything turned out."

Satisfaction with multicultural environment. Canada is a multicultural society, and many of its urban postsecondary campuses reflect this reality. Four respondents connected their experiences of diverse Canadian campuses to their satisfaction with the search outcome: two positive, and two negative. Zhang Xiu Ying (Graduate student, China, GLU) said she was pleased with her experience at Grant Lawrence and with the chance to meet students from all over.

> I have a wonderful life here. Grant Lawrence certainly met my expectations. It's a big and comprehensive university with many people from all over the world. I can learn about different cultures and meet different people here. The facilities are excellent. I can get what I want whenever here. And the climate is suitable for me. Plus, the international student centre always sends me email announcing upcoming activities to me, and if I'm interested I can take part.

Subhash (Graduate certificate, India, Metcalfe C.) also relished his life on a diverse Canadian campus. "I've had a good experience at Metcalfe. I've worked with people from different cultures and it was a good experience, I can say. I enjoyed it. I really like Canada." In contrast, two respondents said they were surprised and disappointed to find themselves in class with students from home. They had hoped for a more immersive cultural experience—an opportunity

to practice English and acclimate to Canadian society. Instead they mostly worked and studied with other international peers. “The institution where I am right now is more of an institution for international students,” reported Malik (Graduate student, India, Everitt-Rollins C.). “I hardly see locals or even people from other ethnicities here. Mainly I see people from my own ethnic group or else from a neighboring country. At times I don’t feel like I’m abroad.” “I’ve found so many Chinese students here, especially in my program,” commented Li Na (Graduate student, China, GLU). “Ninety percent of the students in my classes are Chinese. Only two or three are foreigners. That’s not a good language environment. I’m really upset by this and I want to find some way to improve my oral English.”

Satisfaction with less-selective institutions. At the predisposition stage of their searches, many respondents aspired to highly ranked institutions in Canada and elsewhere. Regardless of how realistic those aspirations might have been, once they hired (commission-based) agents their focus shifted to less elite schools. Only two respondents used non-commissioned agents willing to assist them with applications to highly competitive institutions. Even as their schools weren’t well known or highly ranked, most respondents said they were happy with the outcome. Khalid (Graduate student, Pakistan, GLU) had initially hoped to go to an elite graduate school in the U.S. In reflecting on his experience, he said he was happy with his experience at Grant Lawrence. “The facilities are really good here. I didn't expect them to be that good, but they are. It’s a very new building, and the equipment is modern. So yeah, this is a good place. I don't mind it.” Grant Lawrence (and Canada, for that matter) had not been Amina’s first choice. She wanted to go somewhere more prestigious and urban; somewhere that would impress her friends back home in Pakistan. But since arriving over a year ago, Amina had grown attached to GLU. And her friends were suitably impressed that she had found success in Canada.

> To be honest with you, when I came here for the first month, I *hated* it. I didn't like it at all and I wanted to go back home. When it started snowing, I said 'Oh my God what is this?' Now, I wouldn't want to go back. Because I know what my major is. I know my career goals and my academic goals. I know where I'm going. I know what the benefits are of being here, and I know what people think about me back home. They are like, oh my God, she's studying *somewhere*, you know? She made a much wiser decision than we did.

Amina now believed she wouldn't have fared as well at one of the elite universities to which she originally aspired. "If you go to a university like Langside or Estabrooke, you're just a number. There are thousands of students sitting in the classroom with you. But here at GLU you're actually recognized. Your professor knows you personally."

Satisfaction with private colleges. Only two students in the interview pool – a husband and wife from Pakistan – reported attending private college. Their stories provided one of the starkest examples of misalignment. Both Rahman (Undergraduate student, Pakistan, Ford C.) and Susan (Undergraduate student, Pakistan, Ford C.) had completed master's degrees in Pakistan. Back home, Rahman had worked in the medical industry while Susan taught at a local university. On their agent's recommendation, they both enrolled in diploma programs at Ford College. At the time, they believed this offered the best chance to quickly find jobs to support themselves and their children. Even as they both received high grades, they both came to question the quality and rigor of their programs. While both believed their qualifications had value and would help them quickly find work after graduation, the experience left them quite critical of Ford, private colleges, their agent's performance, and the lack of government oversight. Susan was enrolled in a payroll management program. She believed her course instructor was ill prepared to teach her class and unprepared to offer much assistance when she had questions.

> They give you the textbook and say, 'OK, read it by yourself. You will write an exam on this date so prepare by yourself'. You develop your understanding by yourself. You do it all by yourself. And they only give you the exam that comes with the book. I'm learning how to use an accounting software package called Accpac. The instructor doesn't know this software package at all. He just gave us the book and told us follow the instruction in the book, do the exercises by ourselves. He didn't know how to help when I got stuck. I asked my instructor why I kept getting the amount wrong and he could not help me. I had to learn everything by trial and error.

Rahman described a similar experience. It was nothing like what he'd encountered as a student in Pakistan. It contrasted significantly with the quality he anticipated from a Canadian institution and mirrored the experiences of friends who were at other private colleges in Canada. "We have high expectations in our minds about Canadian society," he explained. "So this is a disappointment for us."

> I'm paying about thirteen thousand dollars to be here, so I deserve the best. I deserve the best. But they are not hiring qualified instructors and it's the same story at all these career colleges. I know this because I know so many other students here so they tell me so. But my wife and I, we are putting in our best efforts with the books, with the tests, with everything.

Rahman and Susan suspected the low quality of instruction at Ford was due to its status as a for-profit, private college. After arriving in Canada, they befriended other international students enrolled at public PSEIs. Susan felt her choice to go to Ford was driven somewhat by expediency. "I was just trapped at the time, " she remembered. "I didn't talk to anyone else. I didn't visit other colleges." "I would never, ever in my life choose a private college again," Rahman insisted. "And I wouldn't suggest them to any friend or family member. If you really want to get somewhere, you must plan for the proper education institutions." While Rahman was careful to note that it was his choice to hire an agent and accept the agent's recommendation, he insisted a better outcome would have been possible if he had gotten better advice. "If I had

gotten the right advice, I would have gone to Chittenden or Langside, instead of a school like Ford. If I'm putting in the effort, why not be in the right place? Why not with the right people?“

And yet both Rahman and Susan said they were satisfied with the search outcome. “I can say I’m 95 percent satisfied,” said Susan. “More than 95 percent satisfied. I’m convinced I’ve made a good decision. I believe this diploma has value. The job openings I look at ask for the same things that I am learning in this course.” Rahman was equally satisfied. “I’m quite satisfied with the education at Ford College. I would say I‘ve found it a good fit for me.” Susan also expressed satisfaction with their agent’s performance, remarking that she wasn’t charged for his services. Given the financial concerns she expressed during interviews, getting his assistance for free was undoubtedly a welcome development. However, this also removed the incentive to comparison shop. “If they‘d charged me something, I would’ve thought twice before going or I would’ve gone to some other agents to ask what they charged. But my agent didn't ask for money.”

What explains the apparent disconnect between the experiences Susan and Rahman described at Ford and their satisfaction with the outcome? Both respondents made it clear that their primary goal was to migrate to Canada. They wanted a better life and greater opportunities for their children. While a reasonable person might conclude they had been mismatched, a diploma program offered several advantages. It was brief when compared with the graduate programs for which their previously earned degrees qualified them. Their previous educational experiences had helped them thrive at Ford, even with little support and instruction from faculty. Their programs were designed to respond to the needs of the job market in their region. As Susan surmised, this would help them quickly find jobs after they graduated. While an earned master’s or Ph.D. would likely have earned them higher salaries, as Susan repeatedly pointed out, her

family's financial needs were urgent. Graduate school could wait until they were more settled. Rahman explained his strategy.

> I read about Chittenden University on the Internet. But when you go for a graduate degree you must count on it taking at least two years. So this one-year diploma is just a transient phase. This is not my final destination. I took this decision in order to settle here, just to step into the primary level of things, right? But I'm very much clear about my final destination. After two years, I will go for a proper university like Langside or Chittenden.

When asked during interviews why they had chosen Canada, Susan talked about Canada's religious freedom and multicultural society. "I can practice my religion here. I can do everything that I want. In Canada, there is no difference between kids. No one calls my kids Asian or discriminates against them. This is important for me." She and Rahman had transplanted their family to Canada, found housing, jobs, and schools for themselves and their children. It's easy to understand why they were largely satisfied with the search outcome. Even still, Rahman was somewhat disillusioned. "If someone asked me to rate my experiences, I'd be honest with them. If someone has a thirst to learn, the school should reciprocate. That's why it's disappointing when the school isn't up to standard, because we wanted to learn."

Satisfaction with post-graduation job prospects. Some respondents partially equated satisfaction with their post-graduation job prospects. Subhash (Graduate certificate, India, Metcalfe C.) was applying for work authorization. "I'm satisfied with what I have done at Metcalfe. There are lots of opportunities to work in Canada." Jack's (Graduate student, India, GLU) faculty enjoyed robust connections with the business sector in the region. He believed this would help him build his own professional network and find work after graduation. "This program is a good fit for me. They offer courses that are current with market needs, and they are well connected with local industries." Murad (Graduate student, India, GLU) was generally satisfied with his program. It was oriented to his career interests and was preparing him well for

a job search after graduation. All the same, he suspected a credential from a highly ranked school would have propelled him further. Murad had applied on his own to a few elite institutions but had not been accepted.

> To be frank, I would've been happier if I'd gone to one of those schools. Overall, I think I'm satisfied with GLU. It's not that I think I'm in the wrong place or anything. It's a very good university. But I applied to better universities. I just didn't get into them.

Aditya (Graduate student, India, GLU) also liked Grant Lawrence for the most part, but wondered whether a degree from an elite institution would have opened more doors. "Statistically speaking, if I had earned a degree in engineering from Dunn-Barton, then I would instantly get a job after graduation. Since my degree is from Grant Lawrence, it will be harder. So in that way, I'm dissatisfied."

Satisfaction with agent performance. "I think it was a good decision to use an agent," explained Malik (Graduate student, India, GLU). "They put everything in one place and showed me what goes where. They filled out a few forms for me, and told me how to file for the visa." Li Wei (Graduate student, China, GLU) also credited her agency for a successful search outcome. "I think they were quite important," she said. "I was quite busy then so I didn't have time to fill out forms, talk to people, and do the research myself. I paid some money and they helped me get to Canada very easily. It saved a lot of trouble." Li Qiang (Graduate student, China, Langside U.) agreed. "My agent was worth the money I paid. Now that I'm familiar with how the process works, perhaps I'd make a different choice. But at that time, I knew nothing about it. I really needed someone to help me." Murad (Graduate student, India, GLU) also cited the time savings agent use delivered.

> It helps you because at times you don't have time to do everything yourself. You can just send them an email and they'll give you the answers. I remember when I applied for my

> visa; I learned it had been delayed because of some issue with the health report. They needed some additional information. I could just call my agents and they could explain it to me. They assured me it was nothing and that I didn't need to worry about it. I'd just need to go through these steps and I'd be fine.

Chao (Graduate student, China, GLU) used a non-commissioned agent. Even as they had carefully co-constructed a list of target institutions that matched his interests, he had been rejected from all but one. Nevertheless, he said he was satisfied with the outcome and his agent's performance. "They did a great job. They helped me make it and succeed. I couldn't have done it all by myself." Jack (Graduate student, India, GLU) was similarly effusive. "I would give my agent a hundred percent of the credit for where I am right now. He was the one who showed me the right direction. I'm here because of him." Aditya (Graduate student, India, GLU) was grateful he had found an agent willing to help him apply to university. "It was a very good experience compared to what I'd experienced with other agents. They just wanted to recruit me to a college. My agent was very systematic. She reviewed everything and said Grant Lawrence was perfect for me."

Four study participants reported that they had maintained contact with their agent well after arriving in Canada. Amira's (Undergraduate student, Pakistan, GLU) agent was an extended family member, so this was hardly surprising. Tashelle's (Graduate certificate, Jamaica, Everitt-Rollins C. / Chang C.) agent continued to assist her when needed. "At one point, my Temporary Resident Visa expired and I was still able to ask him what to do. I'm still communicating with him even though I'm at a different school that he doesn't represent." Omolara's (Undergraduate, Nigeria, Everitt-Rollins C.) agent had become a close friend in the course of the search process. "I wish I could just recommend more people for my agent, because I trust him and I know I didn't make the wrong decision." Jack (Graduate student, India, GLU)

had recommended his agent to several friends back home. “I always give out his number. We’re very good friends right now. We have a very good relationship.”

Qualified satisfaction with agent performance. Other respondents gave their agents mixed reviews. Li Wei (Graduate student, China, GLU) was grateful for his agent’s help but also believed he’d been given misinformation, possibly in a bid to increase the agent’s commission. “He was quite good. The only problem was that the agent told me that on-campus housing was mandatory. They don’t tell you everything.” Li Na (Graduate student, China, GLU) thought her agent misrepresented her chances in the local job market.

> Now that I’m here, I know that’s not how my agency described things. They told me that I could easily find a job here. But last week I talked with someone in a local accounting firm about my career prospects. She told me it's not very easy to find a job in Belmont because of the high unemployment rate. She said there are a few reasons why it will be difficult for you to find a job. The first reason is that you are a foreigner. Big companies won't consider you because you are a foreigner and your English is poor. And smaller companies won't recruit you because they know you are a graduate student, so you won't stay here long. She said that's the reason why I won’t able to find a find a very good job. I was so upset!

Tashelle (Undergraduate student, Jamaica, Everitt-Rollins C. / Chang C.) continued to regret the fee she paid the agent. “I should have done it on my own.” At the time, she didn’t really understand how the process worked. She was the first person in her family to apply to school in Canada. “I wanted to do the correct thing and that's why I used the agent. But now that I’m here, if my brother wanted to come here I’d tell him to do it on his own.” Tashelle also regretted her choice of school. “If I were to do things over again, I’d probably go to a different school. I’d investigate other schools, beyond the school that he represented. Because I had to choose the school that he represented, and there are other schools.” Malik (Graduate student, India, Everitt-Rollins C.) was starting to question the value of his qualification. “I think I

should've taken a master's instead. I've heard about people with master's degrees who struggle to find work. So why hire someone with a graduate certificate when you can hire someone with a master's?"

Low satisfaction with agent performance. Two respondents described dissatisfaction with aspects of the search outcome even as they insisted they were satisfied overall. A teacher with a bachelor's degree, Ying's (Undergraduate student, China, Stites C.) agent persuaded her to apply for a diploma program in hospitality. She was clearly frustrated by the mismatch. "They just messed it up. My agent didn't do very well and he didn't give me what I wanted." Ying no longer thought an agent was essential the way she once did. "I don't think it's necessary to use an agent. Perhaps if you'd like help with your visa or to save you worry in preparing your documents, then maybe it's OK. But for the application there's no need." Even still, she credited her agent will helping her come to Canada and said she was satisfied with the outcome. "They helped me to do a lot of things," she explained. "I guess I can say they helped me 70 percent of the time."

Aarav (Graduate student, India, GLU) waxed philosophical. "Everything in life is experience. I've had some bad experiences. I've had some good experiences. I learned something from all of it." Even still, he professed the greatest degree of dissatisfaction of any respondent.

> If I could do it all again, I wouldn't have hired any agents. I would have searched and applied online. Also, I chose Canada because of the permanent resident program. Had I ignored this factor, I would have chosen Germany. One of my close friends is going to Germany this September. In Germany, they don't have this kind of permanent resident program, but as long as you have a job there you can stay as long as you want. And besides, Germany is much better than Canada in engineering.

Student recommendations for peers. When asked if they would recommend that a peer hire an agent, several respondents urged caution. Yasmin (Graduate student, Pakistan, GLU)

worried that inexperienced students were especially vulnerable to agent misbehavior. “Your agent will tell you that the fee for the visa process is $1200 when the actual fee is $900. And the student will believe it because they don’t know anything.” Jack (Graduate student, India, GLU) urged students to be skeptical and be ready to reality-test agent recommendations. “I’m not saying students shouldn’t use an agent. They should. But they should also have done their own research.” Vivaan (Graduate student, India, GLU) would tell a peer not to be constrained by the options their agents offered. “If you have some universities in mind, apply directly. Their websites will explain how to apply. If you’re unsure of where to apply, use an agent. But if you know where you want to apply, you should never use an agent.” Rahman (Undergraduate student, Pakistan, Ford C.), who had expected so much from Canada and the Canadian educational system, urged other students not to be so trusting.

> Use an agent but do so judiciously and very cautiously. You must have your own priorities, prior to go to any consultation. You must know what you are going to do, what your needs are, and what you want to do once you're there. If you are not guided well, I tell you: the system of Canada—the very good system of Canada—won’t be able to help you out. Because you've been guided wrongly. You are in the wrong hands. You are in the right place, but you are in the wrong hands.

The agent recruitment model relies on student tolerance of both a constrained range of PSEI options and an outcome that delivers mixed results: subordinating student academic goals while providing a glide path to work authorization and PR. Respondents were often willing to accommodate agent pressure to shift their academic interests to align with available institutions and programs. When agent involvement (and pursuit of their own interests) forces students into goal conflict, some will privilege career and personal goals over academic goals. Students who resisted agent pressure often struggled to find someone willing to help them find programs that matched their interests. Respondents experienced a range of outcomes with regard to institutional

fit. Students who used noncommissioned agents had the greatest influence on institutional selection and were least likely to be undermatched or mismatched. Students who used commission-based agents had far fewer options from which to choose. This made consideration of institutional fit less possible.

Even when search outcomes resulted in undermatching or mismatching, respondents generally reported satisfaction with the results although level of satisfaction was correlated with the degree of alignment with academic goals. Students who experienced slight misalignment (e.g., enrolling in schools that were not their first choice but were well-resourced and offered the programs they wanted) were satisfied with their experience. Students who were mismatched (e.g., enrolling in programs that did not match their interests at an education level that did not align with previously earned qualifications) were more likely to qualify their satisfaction or report dissatisfaction with the search outcome.

In Chapter Five, I presented five central themes that emerged from my interviews with 23 international students about their experiences of agent involvement the postsecondary search process. Specifically, I sought to understand the role of student choice in that process and to what extent it influences agent recommendations and—more broadly—the search trajectory. I organized presentation of the themes to chronologically trace the search process, from the factors driving initial student interest in education abroad through to their degree of satisfaction with the search outcome. In Chapter Six, I provide further discussion and interpretation of the study findings and suggest implications for key stakeholders in the international student recruitment process.

Chapter Five: Discussion and Implications

In this final chapter, I provide an overview of the study, including brief discussion of the rationale, review of the research questions, and the method. I summarize the five key study findings and revisit the conceptual framework I developed to inform the study. I identify implications for the primary stakeholders in the international postsecondary search process (students and families; agents; institutions; policymakers) and provide recommendations. I discuss the limitations of the study, suggest directions for future research, and end with concluding thoughts.

Rationale

Globalization and its attendant pressures exert significant influence on postsecondary education and its various stakeholders. Declines in public funding, the expectation that PSEIs serve as economic drivers for their regions, and the commoditization of postsecondary education stimulate institutional efforts to recruit abroad. Increasing international enrollment may offer multiple benefits for PSEIs: expanded revenue streams, new market areas, greater opportunities for intercultural learning, and enhanced prestige. For jurisdictions, attracting a greater share of the international student market may provide them with a source of skilled, credentialed migrants; foster greater economic ties with sending countries; and boost local economies. A variety of push and pull factors (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002) catalyze student interest in postsecondary opportunities abroad. They seek a competitive edge in the job market; expanded professional networks to nurture careers and expand family businesses; and the ease of travel afforded by acquiring PR or dual citizenship. Limited economic opportunities or a deteriorating security environment may also prompt students to find a way to leave their home countries.

Education agents have emerged to capitalize on the global student recruitment market.

Agents act as intermediaries between applicants, PSEI admissions staff, and consular officers. They may represent institutional clients, student clients, or both. It is common for agents to represent and receive compensation from both students and institutions in the same transaction. This prompts concerns that agent self-interest competes with their clients' welfare when managing the search process. The same qualities that make agent use attractive also leave their clients more vulnerable to agent misdirection. Students may prefer to hire an experienced guide to manage a complex and time-intensive process on their behalf, but doing so provides agents with almost insurmountable influence over student decision-making. Institutions may see agents as cost-effective cultural insiders who are familiar with a distant recruitment market, but this distance and difference can limit auditing and oversight of agent behavior. Concerns about agent misdirection have not prevented their use by students and institutions alike from becoming ubiquitous. That said, North American institutions have been slower to adopt the practice, and the uptick in agent involvement has been met with controversy, particularly in the United States.

Canada's experience with international recruitment is markedly different to that of the U.S., which made Canada an interesting context for this study. Canadian international recruitment policies and practices occupy a middle ground between Australia's unabashed entrepreneurialism and the caution that delayed (and often still stigmatizes) agent use by American educational institutions. Postwar massification of the Canadian postsecondary system occurred as a strategy to widen participation, both in fast growing urban areas and in hinterland regions that historically lacked access. This policy focus on domestic students delayed institutional and policymaker interest in international recruitment (Jones, 2009). Economic and demographic changes in Canada have widened this focus. Policymakers now view attracting and retaining international students as an effective means of addressing current and projected labor

shortages, falling birthrates, and depopulation in hinterland regions. As a competitive strategy in a recruitment market dominated by the U.S., Canada expedites permanent residency for international students who graduate from a Canadian PSEI. This is a significant difference from the U.S., for which the student visa pathway does not lead to permanent status. It also stimulates demand by would-be economic migrants who view securing a Canadian student visa as the quickest, surest path to permanent residency. While policymaker concerns persist about misuse of this pathway, nearly any educational outcome (an earned, recognized credential from a Canadian PSEI, and thus a prospective skilled migrant) meets the policy objective.

Research Questions

This study was undertaken to provide better understanding of the experiences of international students who used an agent to assist with Canadian postsecondary placement, and what role student choice played in this process. Six additional research questions were developed to help answer this organizing question:

1. What do students consider to be the affordances and limitations of agent involvement?
2. From the student's perspective, what does the process of postsecondary placement via an agent involve?
3. From the student's perspective, what role does student choice play in this process?
4. From the student's perspective, are agents responsive to student choice?
5. To what extent do students perceive that the institutions selected is a good fit?
6. How satisfied are students with the search outcome?

Method

I undertook a qualitative approach to this study, interviewing 23 international undergraduate and graduate students at several colleges and universities in Canada. From May to November of 2013, I actively recruited prospective study participants – through referrals from staff colleagues, hanging fliers in academic buildings and surrounding neighborhoods, and posting notices on social media sites and other online forums. After being contacted by 37 prospective participants, I identified 23 current students on seven campuses that met the study criteria and were interested in participating. From July to December of 2013, I interviewed all 23 students. Most interviews took place on or adjacent to the campuses the student attended. One interview took place over Skype.

Overview of Study Findings

I identified and explained the study findings in great detail in Chapter Five. Here, I briefly review the most central findings and provide a theoretical base to interpret and explain the results.

How students construct their goal orientations. Several push and pull factors influenced participants' goal construction during the initial (predisposition) phase of the search process. 21 of 23 respondents cited an interest in migration as an influence on their decisions to study abroad. For many international students the desire to migrate is the organizing principle that drives decision-making, particularly with regard to selection of a destination country. This also leads students to subordinate consideration of institutional fit once persuaded doing so is necessary to gain access to the pathway to PR. Students sought PR both to secure their own futures, but also often with an eye to family obligations. Parents often provide critical financial

support to offset their children's educational expenses, with the understanding that in turn their children will support them in retirement. This expectation becomes more urgent in situations where parents have liquidated their savings and drives student determination to succeed and work abroad. For students with families of their own, study abroad can be a strategy to provide a better, more secure life for their children.

Growing instability and violence, limited opportunities—especially for women—and social problems associated with rapid development may also stimulate an interest in education abroad. Four (17% of study participants) respondents—all women—said that they had come to Canada hoping for the kind of opportunities that did not exist for them at home. Three of the four said their families had actively encouraged them to leave home and go abroad. All four cited Canada's reputation for egalitarianism, the rule of law, and social inclusion as a significant attractor. They believed that in Canada they could find peace, security, and horizons to match their ambitions. While none ruled out the possibility of returning home to live one day, all four saw Canada as offering them a much greater chance for freedom, security, and prosperity than they could find at home.

The perception that PSE abroad is of higher quality may also drive respondents' decision-making. Twenty-one of 23 respondents had already earned a postsecondary qualification in their home countries. Four students (17% of study participants) cited dissatisfaction with the quality of or access to postsecondary education at home as a reason to go abroad. They believed that both the content and pedagogy available in Canadian PSEIs would better equip them to meet their career and academic goals. One student also marveled at the comprehensive array of student support services his university offered, observing that nothing similar existed back in his country. Another suggested that competition for admission to graduate programs in her field was

so intense back home that she felt compelled to come to Canada to continue her studies.

Students also named three pull factors that stimulated their interest in going abroad. Fifteen of 23 respondents cited fairly broad learning-related goals—achieving academically, knowledge and skills acquisition, or the chance to experience postsecondary education in a different country—as an important motivating factor. Nearly all (21 of 23) respondents had already experienced formal postsecondary education at home and had thrived. They enjoyed the learning process and most of them had performed well. Most respondents sought academic programs that built off what they had learned while earning previous educational qualifications, although some were persuaded to do otherwise by their agents.

In contrast, respondents' career-related goals were generally more detailed. All 23 respondents were enrolled in pre-professional courses of study with clear paths for employment upon degree completion. Completing a degree program abroad requires a sustained and significant investment of time and money. For students with bachelor's degrees who were already working in their chosen fields, pursuing a graduate degree means forfeiting years of full time salary and benefits, not to mention the job itself. Not surprisingly, this motivates students to strive for an outcome that provides a measurable return on their investment. Many students hoped to work full-time in Canada after graduation to gain Canadian work experience, earn money to offset school-related costs, and to better position them to secure PR. An interest in a job and PR in Canada does not preclude students from imagining lives and careers elsewhere. Respondents often described future plans that spanned both sending and destination countries: bringing parents over to live in Canada while growing family businesses back at home. For students who aspired to multinational careers, the access and ease of travel afforded by carrying a Canadian passport held strong appeal.

Fourteen of 23 respondents also mentioned a desire to explore, test themselves, and experience the adventure of life, work, and study abroad as an important pull factor. Two themes emerged from respondent stories. First, a desire to face and overcome the challenges associated with cultural and linguistic immersion. Coming to Canada marked the first time any of them had lived outside their home country, and for many of them it was the first time they had traveled outside their home regions. Students imagined the experience would help them learn to become more resourceful and independent. Second, students were attracted to the chance to live and learn in a multicultural society. A clear majority of respondents had grown up in racially homogeneous communities. While vacationing in Canada might have afforded a taste of life in a diverse society, completing a degree there afforded students the chance for a more robust experience.

Different reference groups influence student perceptions and decisions in different ways and at different times during the search process. Respondents named three reference groups: parents and families; peers; and teachers, colleagues, and supervisors as having the greatest influence on their thinking and choice-making at the initial—or predisposition—stage of the search process. Of these, parents and families were the most significant. Parents in a position to bankroll their children's search process (e.g., paying for agent, application, and visa fees) and education abroad may enjoy even more leverage. Siblings and extended family members also influenced student goal orientations, especially if they were already living, working, and studying abroad themselves. Their selection of country, region, and institution could sometimes serve as a "decision trail" for another family member to follow. Family members could also use their personal and professional networks to identify others in a position to provide advice, counsel, and referrals.

Peers also influence and support student goal formation and decision-making, especially if they had already gone abroad themselves. Peers abroad could serve as role models, provide advice and referrals, and support students once they arrived in the destination country. In contrast, peers who had not left the home country were largely confined to offering support and encouragement. Respondents also named teachers, colleagues, and supervisors as an important reference group. The large number of graduate students in the study pool meant that most respondents were already working full time in their chosen professions when they began their postsecondary search. Colleagues and supervisors could stimulate interest in going abroad and suggest how a graduate degree could help them advance in their careers. Some students approached (current and former) teachers to ask for a letter of recommendation to accompany their application materials. They were supportive, but did not catalyze initial student decisions to seek postsecondary opportunities abroad.

Student perceptions of the affordances and limitations of agent involvement. Just as students use their reference group networks in goal formation and initial decision-making, the information and insight they provide influences student perception and selection of agents. Reference group members could share (positive and negative) anecdotes regarding agent use and provide advice and recommendations as to agent selection and hiring. That said, the information they provided students was usually insufficient to completely shield students from bad actors. Students knew enough to be cautious, but not enough to steer clear of bad agents and bad advice. Students find agent involvement desirable not only for their knowledge and expertise but also for their ability to absorb the complex tasks associated with the search. One respondent suggested hiring an agent was akin to ordering takeout when you don't feel like cooking. The diner got a prepared meal, but didn't necessarily know what corners were cut, what went into the dish, or

what the markup was.

Respondents readily identified both affordances and limitations associated with agent use. Sixteen of 23 respondents identified agent knowledge and experience as a primary benefit of agent use. Students hire agents to be both "knowers" and "doers". Agents could use their knowledge to recommend a destination country, region, institution, and course. They could also help students navigate the visa application process. Agents also typically take lead in managing the logistics associated with the search process. They were generally the primary point of contact with the institution. They assembled and submitted their clients' application materials; prepared personal statements and resumes; and could even secure airfare and housing. While some respondents were content to turn responsibility over to their agents, more price-conscious students noticed that the tasks agents completed on their behalf were uncomplicated and clearly described on institutional and government websites.

Anecdotes from reference group members often reinforce the perception that agent use is preferable to going it alone. Many respondents shared cautionary tales of peers who had applied on their own and had been rejected, then applied elsewhere with an agent's help and got accepted. These stories often lacked information that would have allowed for a more accurate evaluation of student and client actions. Instead students connected the dots, inferring that agent involvement was the key factor in a successful outcome. Students often make similar leaps with regard to the value they assign to agent relationships with PSEIs and consular officers. In addition to agent familiarity with the admissions and visa processes, students infer that this provides agents with leverage in both that can be exercised on their clients' behalf. Others took the relationship agents had with the PSEIs they represented to be a marker of credibility and reliability. Respondents' stories suggested that agents themselves sometimes claimed special

relationships with institutions and consular officials. In one case, an agent even threatened to use her purported connections with admissions officials to derail a student's application unless he hired her to prepare his visa application.

Respondents also turned to agents to accelerate the time to completion and alleviate time anxiety associated with the search. Students may experience time anxiety for several reasons. They are enmeshed in complex, parallel processes in which it is difficult to predict or influence the time to completion. They may have started elsewhere, with a different destination country and target institutions. Visa or application rejection sets them back at square one, with limited time to avoid a delay in matriculation. Some students delayed starting their search until after graduation, well past the application deadline for many graduate programs. This set off a scramble to find a PSEI ready to admit them in time to start in September. Other students unwilling or unable to manage the search process themselves saw agent involvement as a timesaving strategy. Busy with school, work, and other personal commitments, they hired an agent the way one might hire an accountant or housepainter. Students who were working full time prior to coming to Canada were especially interested in agents as timesavers. Students who outsourced logistics management to agents invariably found that they had relinquished decision-making responsibilities as well. In countries in which institutions commonly bear most or all of the costs associated with agent involvement, students cited no/low cost as a benefit of agent use. The costs were often so minimal that to some respondents it seemed silly *not* to hire one.

Respondents from countries where students bear a greater share of the agent fees cited cost as a limitation of agent use. Students who expressed discomfort with the amount they were charged were more likely to report dissatisfaction with agent performance. Some reported discerning instances of agent upcharges for completing modest, easily completed tasks. While no

respondent explicitly referenced the concept of *agency dilemma*, it encompasses a range of student concerns about agent behavior. Students hire agents to provide insight and knowledge they don't have, but this same deficit prevents them from assessing the accuracy of agent recommendations. The lack of transparency with which agents typically operate may also obscure both the degree to which agents add value as well as instances in which they put self-interest above their clients. Students were not naïve about what motivated agents to help them, but were nevertheless unable to assess the degree to which a prospective commission influenced agents' advice.

The prevailing arrangement between PSEIs and agents funnels students to institutions that have agreed to pay the agents a commission. As such, agents typically represent only a handful of PSEIs in any given country. Elite institutions recruit internationally on their reputations and don't generally pay agent commissions. Less well-known institutions hoping to increase their international enrollments often do. This means that students who use commission-based agents are structurally excluded from applying to highly ranked institutions, regardless of how competitive they would have been as candidates. Moreover, the drastically reduced range of PSEIs and programs their agents represent often preclude discussion of institutional fit and increase the likelihood of undermatching or mismatching. Two respondents reported that their agents represented only one PSEI. South Asian respondents' stories revealed a strong bias in agent recommendations towards colleges, even for clients with earned bachelor's degrees and an expressed interest in graduate programs. One student reported having to switch agents several times before finding one willing to assist him with applying to master's programs. Several respondents currently enrolled in college had completed bachelor's degrees at home. Some respondents speculated that colleges pay higher commissions than universities.

Agents as a pivotal reference group influencing student choice making. While agents did not emerge as an influential reference group until after the initial (predisposition) stage, by the choice stage, they ranked alongside parents and had outpaced peers with regard to institutional selection. Referrals from trusted others were particularly valuable. In circumstances where they had no first-person experience, reference group members were often willing to leverage personal and professional networks to find someone willing to recommend the agent they used. Respondents often used words like "famous" and "popular" to describe qualities they considered desirable in an agent. Their stories made it clear that they inferred that both were markers of quality, honesty, good service, and prosperity. A "famous" agency gained fame through national expansion. Opening multiple locations meant that business was good, and business was good because they had satisfied clients. Similarly, an agent was "popular" because of its high placement rate. One respondent inferred that his agency's swanky furnishings and location in a high-end business district meant that they must be adept at client satisfaction. Respondents also reported that advertising influenced agent selection. Agents employed both traditional media—newspaper ads, fliers, and billboards—as well as social media and search engine ad placement. Agencies often advertise free seminars in which students can learn about their services and ask questions.

Study participants reported discussing their academic, career, and personal goals with their agents, but agents' extremely limited range of institutions and programs often required students to compromise on one or more of their goals to move forward. Agent recommendations were often intended to convince students to abandon or shift academic goals to align with available institutional and course options. Students consented once persuaded that doing so was necessary and would advance broader goals (e.g., migration, PR). This often put students at risk

of institutional undermatching (enrollment at an institution for which their previous academic performance over-qualifies them) or mismatching (enrollment in a program or institution that misaligns with their professed academic interests).

Agents used a variety of strategies to persuade respondents to abandon or re-align their academic goals. Some told students that they lacked the grades, test scores, educational pedigree (e.g., attending a university that wasn't "famous"), and English proficiency to be accepted at the schools that interested them. Others recommended schools with low standards and quick decisions to expedite process completion. One respondent said her agent had told her the program she liked at highly ranked Langside didn't accept international students. This was easily disproven by a visit to the program's website, which suggests the student never reality-tested her agent's advice. In contrast, two students who used non-commission based agents reported co-constructing a list of target institutions based on their academic, career, and personal goals.

Agent self-interest may increase the likelihood of undermatching or mismatching in two other ways. Contracts that provide for a refund if the client is not accepted anywhere may encourage the inclusion of PSEIs with low/open admission standards in the set of target institutions. Since agent reputations are made in part by high placement rates, agents may prioritize getting their clients an offer over attending to questions of institutional fit.

One recruitment strategy agents (and institutions) use is to make faculty members available and empower them to make on-the-spot admissions decisions. Most respondents that were given the opportunity to receive an on-the-spot decision did so and cited this as a critical factor in their decision to attend that school. Students found faculty recruiters to be knowledgeable, credible, and prepared to address the specifics of the program that interested them. Involving faculty members and providing an on-the-spot admissions decision addresses

student time anxiety and their concerns about the legitimacy of the agent, the institution, and the application process.

Career and personal goals often catalyze and drive student interest in education abroad. Agents persuaded respondents that studying in Canada represented the best, most likely pathway to achieving these goals. Specifically, work authorization and PR were the shadow products that agents marketed to their clients. They frequently provided detailed information about Canadian immigration law and policy, assisted students with the visa application process, and described the value a particular educational qualification would have in the job market. For some students, their program, institution, and even Canada were not their first choice. Most had willingly compromised; having been persuaded by their agent that this path would lead to the bright, prosperous, secure futures they hoped for.

Students reality-test agent recommendations. Students wary of being misdirected by their agents often seek out alternative information sources as a strategy to verify what they've been told. I used the term *reality-testing* in describing instances of this strategy. Students went about reality-testing agent information in a variety of ways. They used their reference group networks to gather more data about the institutions their agents recommended. Family and friends already in Canada who could provide first-hand information about schools and communities could be particularly helpful. Students also used social media networks to extend their networks in the event they didn't already have friends or family studying at institutions their agents suggested for them. Specifically, they used Facebook, instant messaging services like AIM and QQ, and chat rooms to identify and contact peers from their home countries already enrolled at the Canadian PSEIs they were considering. Some searched for chat rooms with names like "Chinese Students at Langside University". One student searched for students

with family names common to his region among Facebook profiles affiliated with the college his agent recommended. The students they contacted were generally quite willing to help. They could provide information (e.g., the cost of living) that was not readily available elsewhere, provide a firsthand account of life on campus and in town, and—if they were not satisfied—encourage students to apply elsewhere. In theory, agents could easily connect current clients with students they had previously helped get to Canada. In practice, some were willing while others were not.

Students also visited institutional websites, both to verify their agent's information and to learn more about the school and community. Stories about students being misdirected to unaccredited, disreputable institutions prompted some respondents to do what they could to verify that the schools their agents recommended were legitimate. One student described typing the names of institutions his agent represented into Google, followed by "hoax", to see what information turned up.

Student satisfaction with search outcome does not rely on institutional fit. Despite a variety of outcomes with regard to institutional fit, nearly all respondents expressed some degree of satisfaction with the outcome. Even students who were mismatched nevertheless reported being satisfied with their circumstances. This result is produced when agents convince their clients to realign their academic goals to match the programs and institutions available. Further, student willingness to make selections from a constrained list (the agent's institutional clients) makes institutional fit less germane to decision making. Students are willing to make these sacrifices once persuaded that doing so will put them on a path to achieving their broader career and personal goals (e.g., migration and PR). With so much invested in going to study abroad, students may also feel that dissatisfaction is not an option. This may make them more willing to

accommodate undermatching or mismatching.

Respondents' reflections on their institutions often sounded like those expressed by their domestic counterparts. They had made tough choices in circumstances where the outcome was not guaranteed and had successfully settled into life and study in Canada. Their pride in their success had a halo effect, easing earlier concerns expressed during the search. Students commented positively on the facilities, their professors, and campus life. Students' expectations with regard to diversity on campus were not always met. While some sought and found multicultural campus communities, others found their classrooms full of students from home.

Many students who had been undermatched reported satisfaction with the less-selective campuses they attended. Some theorized that, in retrospect, these schools were likely a better fit than the elite schools to which they had originally aspired. Two students (a married couple, with young children) who had been recruited to a for-profit private college provided the most dramatic example of mismatch in the study. Even though both had advanced degrees, they nevertheless agreed to apply for admission to one-year diploma programs. Even as they excelled in their programs, they described the quality of education as inferior to what they had experienced in Pakistan. One student concluded that a lack of government oversight was to blame. Even still, both expressed high levels of satisfaction with the outcome. With family finances depleted from the move to Canada, both students believed the diplomas they were earning would afford them quick entry to the job market. Their experience provides a useful example of the degree to which students will sacrifice institutional fit in service of broader career and personal goals.

A majority of respondents expressed satisfaction with the search outcome, which was generally correlated either with their perceived employment prospects after graduation, their

agent's performance, or both. Students in programs with robust industry connections (e.g., engineering) could readily see how their courses were preparing them to be competitive in the job market after graduation. Two students' satisfaction with their search outcome was tempered by suspicion that a degree from a more highly ranked university would have afforded them yet more opportunity. Students who were satisfied with their agent's performance expressed appreciation for the work their agent did to manage their applications, and for the time they saved their clients. Four students were so pleased with their agents' work that they have maintained ongoing social and/or professional contact long after arriving in Canada.

Four students qualified their satisfaction, citing instances of agent misdirection or misrepresentation. While they were pleased overall with the search outcome, some regretted the decision to use an agent. Two other students expressed even more acute dissatisfaction with their agents' performance. One mismatched student was clearly frustrated with where she had ended up, even as she credited her agent for being helpful 70 percent of the time. The student who expressed the greatest amount of dissatisfaction essentially wrote it off as life experience. Even still, if he could have done it all again, he wouldn't have hired an agent or come to Canada. When asked what they would tell a peer considering the use of an agent, most respondents advised caution. They suggested that students should do their own research (reality-testing), not hesitate to apply directly, and to be clear about their priorities.

Conceptual Framework

In Chapter Two I identified and described three components of my conceptual framework: (1) Cultural orientation as a critical context; (2) Reference groups exercise influence over different choice points; and (3) Students may not be the primary decision makers and their individual needs and preferences may not come first. This framework informed both

development of the research questions and the design of the study. While the study findings largely correspond to this framework, I provide an amended version (Figure 3) that includes elements unaccounted in the original version. I also discuss both the affordances and limitations of this framework in understanding and interpreting study results.

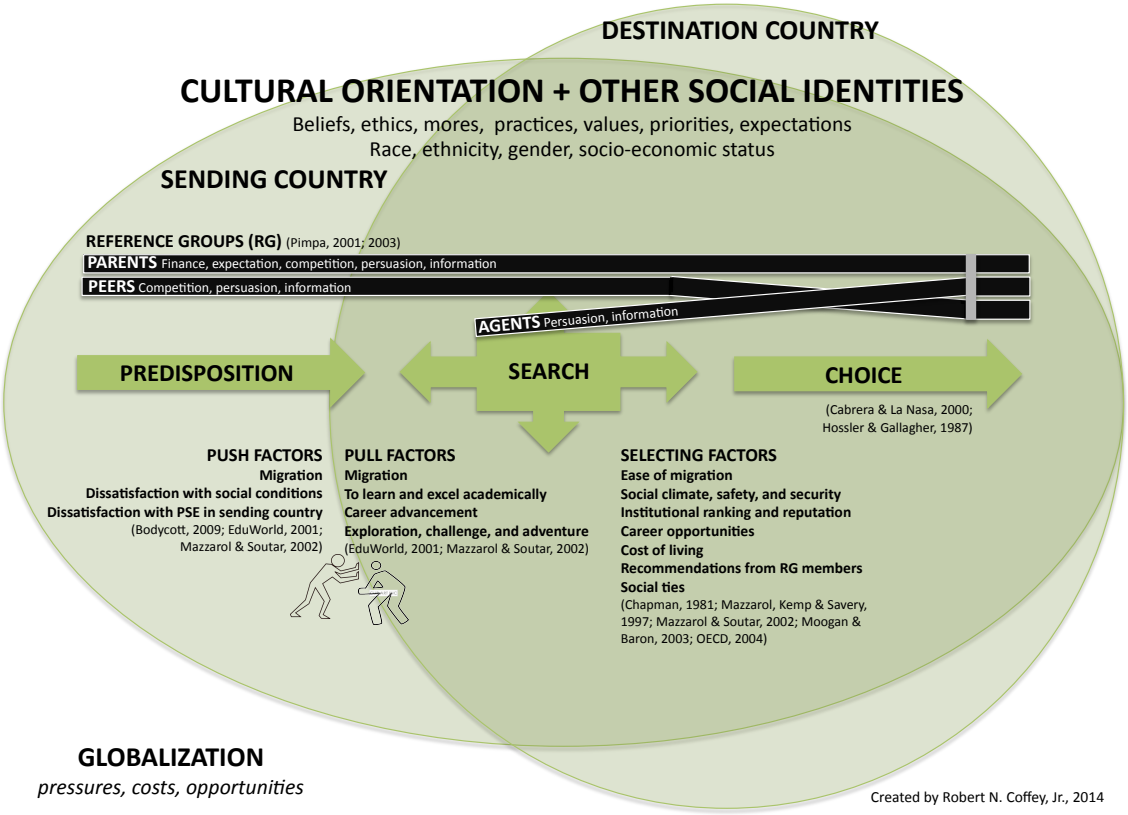

Figure 3 Amended Conceptual Framework

Cultural orientation as a critical context. Current research provides ample evidence for the salience of social identity (e.g., race, gender, SES) in the college choice process (Stage & Hossler, 1989; Shank & Beasley, 1998; Freeman, 1999; Hurtado, Inkalas, Briggs & Rhee, 1997; Perna, 2000), but this work was largely done involving domestic students in the U.S. I used the term *cultural orientation* (defined as "norms associated with a student's cultural background,

nationality, ethnic group, or other cultural social identity") in identifying a social identity that I would attend to in seeking better understanding of international students' experiences. I intentionally used a broad definition in hopes of capturing a range of experiences that differentiated international students from their North American peers.

Issues and concerns related to social identity, nationality, and cultural identity did turn up in respondents' stories, but often in ways that the definition I provided didn't capture or predict. While country-specific trends did emerge with regard to factors motivating student interest in education abroad, they had more to do with socioeconomic concerns (e.g., most Pakistani respondents cited the deteriorating security environment at home as a push factor) than with cultural orientation as defined. Respondents were much more likely to cite social identities like race, gender, SES, or religious affiliation as salient, particularly as it related to the inclusive (even racism-free) social climate they hoped and expected to find in Canada. Recall Subhash's (Graduate certificate, India, Metcalfe C.) cousin's assurance that Canada had "no problem with racism" and Yasmin's (Graduate student, Pakistan, GLU) conviction that Canada offered her far greater personal freedom than she would ever have at home.

Respondents' stories suggest the importance of considering the multiple cultural contexts in play (with globalization as the backdrop) during the postsecondary search process for international students. The transaction in which students, institutions, agents, and jurisdictions engage involves both sending and destination countries. Each has cultural norms, practices, expectations, values, and assumptions that may align or conflict. Both contexts are influential and thus important on both the individual (e.g., student understandings of familial obligations) and jurisdictional (e.g., countries with histories of soliciting and assimilating newcomers) levels. These different contexts begin to interact at the search stage, once the student has identified a

destination country of interest. They inform the students' interests and motivations as well as institutional and jurisdictional efforts to solicit them.

Students' stories provide anecdotal examples of how cultural orientation influenced their decision-making. Some recalled asking agents and reference group members if familiar foods would be available in Canada. Two Chinese students who wanted to study in English excluded Singapore and Hong Kong from consideration, as they wanted to experience Western culture firsthand. Many respondents expressed a preference for studying in English (a point of intersection with the destination country's cultural orientation). Historical ties often influence the trajectory of student migration (Bolsmann & Miller, 2008; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; CERI, 2004; Altbach, 2009; Perkin, 2006). As former colonies of the British Empire, Canada, India, Jamaica, Nigeria, Pakistan, and the U.S. all share English as a common language. Several respondents cited a preference for studying in English, even in cases where superior opportunities were available in a non-Anglophone country. Recall Khalid's (Graduate student, Pakistan, GLU) story of his friends who went to Germany and Korea for top-ranked graduate programs but who struggled with learning a new language. Of course, English's status as a global lingua franca is likely also a strong motivator. For students who had worked hard to acquire English as non-native speakers, the prospect of starting over with another language may simply have been unappealing.

Respondents' stories also suggest an interesting parallel with that of working class/low-SES students in the U.S. As I have previously discussed, both populations are characterized by relatively sparse reference group networks that limit the sources, breadth, quality, relevance, and accuracy of information about postsecondary options available to them. More specifically, both populations often lack access to reference group members with first-person experience of

postsecondary education and the search process. This lack of cultural capital can be a significant constraint on student choice-making. Since reference group members' collective postsecondary knowledge and experience is much more limited, students may never learn of other, better program or institutional options. Fewer options may also mean diminished opportunities for comparison—a process that can refine student discernment with regard to institutional fit.

Issues related to cultural orientation surfaced most frequently with regard to authorship of decision-making in the process and specifically in the role parents and family members play. I address this further in the section on student decision-making below.

Reference groups exercise influence over different time points. Current research on both domestic and international students has found that reference groups exercise varying influence over student choice-making at different stages in the search process. (Chapman, 1981; Stage & Hossler, 1989; Flint, 1992; Pimpa, 2001, 2003, 2005, 2008; Ceja, 2006, Bodycott, 2009). Pimpa's (2001; 2008) research on Thai students found that parents/family members, peers, and agents were the most influential groups across five categories: *finance* (funding)*; information* (leveraging others' experience of life, work, and study abroad)*; expectation* (values and opinions); *persuasion* (leveraging a relationship with the student to influence decision making); and *competition* (concern for social status). While parents and family influence potentially extends across all five categories, peer influence is limited to information, competition, and persuasion (Pimpa, 2001; 2003; 2005). Agent influence is negligible at the predisposition stage, but increases as students select a destination country, institution, and program (Bhati & Anderson, 2012).

Study findings mostly aligned with this previous research. Respondents named parents, other family members, and peers as critical reference groups that they repeatedly consulted

throughout the search process. 21 of 23 respondents said their parents had had the greatest influence on their decision to go abroad. Moreover, the stories they shared provided multiple examples of parent/family influence across each of the five categories Pimpa (2001; 2008) identified. Parents provided financial support (*finance*) to offset both search-related expenses (e.g., agent fees) and the costs of education abroad. They leveraged personal and professional networks (*information*) to connect students with others who could offer advice and referrals. Their values and opinions (*expectation* and *persuasion*) about the value and purpose of life, work, and study abroad influenced student goal development. They encouraged students (*competition*) to match the achievements of siblings and extended family members who were already abroad.

Respondents also provided examples of the ways in which their peers influenced their decision-making. Friends already studying abroad provided advice, support, and referrals (*information*) to guide them in the search process. Their enthusiasm for going abroad (*persuasion*) often inspired and sustained respondents' interest. Peers could also provide positive and negative pressure (*competition*) on respondents concerned about social status. Respondents sometimes described peers who had found success abroad as role models. In Li Qiang's (Graduate student, China, Langside U.) case, a concern for losing face may have kept him from sharing details about his search with friends until he had secured admission to an elite institution.

Agent influence grows significantly as the search progresses. This aligns with current literature on agent involvement (Bhati & Anderson, 2012). No respondents named agents as having influenced their initial decision to seek education abroad. Nearly half said their agent had influenced their selection of Canada as a destination country, while thirteen of 23 said the agent was the primary influence in PSEI selection. I depict this rise in agent influence in the amended

conceptual framework (Figure 3). Respondents' stories revealed how agent influence—though constrained to Pimpa's (2001; 2003) *information* and *persuasion* categories—rivals parents' influence by the choice stage of the search process. Students hire agents in part for the information and experience they possess. Agents provided respondents with information (*information*) about PSEI options, courses of study, the application process, and the visa process. Their advice and recommendations (*persuasion)* is intended to convince students to apply to one of the programs and institutions they represent.

Students may not be the primary choice makers. Agents and parents potentially compete with students for leadership of the search process. All three are primary stakeholders, and while any given outcome may potentially satisfy all three to varying degrees, their interests do not necessarily align. Prior research provides evidence of this competition with regard to parental involvement. While we know less about the impact of agent involvement, the current study found that commission-based agents were more successful than parents in competing for oversight and decision making power. The expertise students ascribe to agents, the lead role agents assume in process management, and the limited range of PSEIs and programs all constrain student opportunities for meaningful decision making.

Parents. Cultural orientation may assign specific roles and expectations to parents and students (Bodycott, 2009). Parents are expected to sacrifice to support a child's education. In turn the child accedes to his/her parents' selection of destination and program, even if it does not align with their own preferences (Li, 2011). Previous studies of Chinese students found that 100% of study participants reported that their parents had been actively involved in decision-making, with 65% indicating that their parents had selected their institution and program for them (Bodycott, 2009). Students and families from Confucian cultures may place a premium on

education (Li, 2001) both as a cultural value and a pathway to economic prosperity and security (Bodycott & Lai, 2012). With regard to the search process, prior studies found that parents often take the lead in hiring and consulting with agents, even as they don't completely trust their advice (Bodycott, 2009).

Findings from the present study partially align with this prior research. While nearly all respondents identified parents as a significant influence, few reported that their parents had been the primary decision-makers or dictated the search outcome (i.e., selected the student's institution and program). Respondents' stories provided many examples of parental influence. Some encouraged their children's ambitions to go abroad as Amina's (Undergraduate student, Pakistan, GLU) had, or suggest they rethink their plans, as Vivaan's (Graduate student, India, GLU) did. They provided critical emotional support, as Chao's (Graduate student, China, GLU) mother had. They provided funding to defray search and school-related costs, as Jack's (Graduate student, India) father and Zhang Yiu Ying's (Graduate student, China, GLU) mother did. They connected students to others who could provide advice, recommendations, and referrals, as Li Xia's (Graduate student, China, GLU) had. In some cases, they took the lead in identifying prospective agents, as Jack's (Graduate student, India, GLU) had, and—more infrequently—hired one on their children's behalf, as Li Na's (Graduate student, China, GLU) father did.

Many respondents in turn described their obligations to parents. Jack's (Graduate student, India, GLU) story of the aspiring rapper at Tim Horton's revealed for him how different—and much more explicit—his parents' expectations of him were. Many students came to Canada not only to secure their own futures, but their parents' futures as well. Some had plans to care for their parents once they were established, as Li Na (Graduate student, China, GLU) and Aarav

(Graduate student, India, GLU) did. For students of modest means whose education abroad had cost their families' savings, this obligation could be especially pressing.

Parents' influence and support did not include taking the lead in the search process. Most respondents indicated they had been the lead decision-makers, albeit with significant input from primary reference group members. They interviewed and hired their own agents, solicited information about the destinations their agents recommended, and made the decision to apply and enroll. Most respondents' parents appear to have been comfortable remaining at a distance and did not intervene in or compete with student decision-making. Subhash's (Graduate certificate, India, Metcalfe C.) parents insisted he take the lead in his own search process. "My parents told me, 'You want to study abroad, you must gather all the information, talk to the appropriate people, and then decide. We're just here to support you financially. That's our responsibility. Finding a college is your responsibility.'" Even students whose parents had selected an agent on their behalf assumed the lead once the agent had been hired. All that said, not all respondents had this experience. Two students—both undergraduate students—reported needing their parents' permission to study abroad. Both students also said their families had selected agents on their behalf. One of the two reported that her family selected an institution for her.

Two factors may account for the deviation from previous study findings. Graduate students predominate in the study pool, accounting for eighteen of 23 respondents. Of the remaining five students, three had already earned postgraduate qualifications in their home countries. Not surprisingly, respondents were also older, with an average age of 25 years. It seems plausible that students in their mid twenties and older would exercise greater personal autonomy and rely less on their parents to make decisions for them. Second, most respondents (fifteen of 23) did not

come from the Confucian-oriented societies that provided the setting for much of this prior research. As such, the *xiao qin* (filial piety) dynamic that helps explain the leadership role parents assume (Bodycott, 2009) would not be in play in countries like India, Pakistan, Nigeria, and Jamaica.

Agents. There is very little prior research into the impact of agent involvement on student choice-making, although agency dilemma theory helps to explain the challenge clients face in evaluating whether a hired agent is acting in their best interests. Further, Becker's (1960) side-bet theory suggests one's commitment to achieving a particular outcome (A) increases if one chooses to pursue other outcomes (B and C) that rely on achieving A to succeed. Respondents' stories suggest both theories can be used to understand and even predict the outcome of agent involvement. The dominant role that agents play in their clients' search processes is baked into the prevailing commission-based model. Respondents who hired a commission-based agent for their expertise and managerial skills quickly found their role limited to responding and acceding to agent recommendations. Students will tolerate a gap between their needs and preferences and what the agent can deliver, provided the outcome permits progress toward broader career and personal goals. If this gap is too great, the only option left is to fire the agent and begin again. Time anxiety coupled with the perception that failure or delay is expensive may lead students to stay with their agents, even when undermatching or mismatching is a likely result.

Whereas my original conceptual framework identified two categories of pull factors (destination country and institutional), respondents' stories suggest that it may be more helpful to think of pull factors as less related to a specific destination and more generally about the Somewhere Else beyond students' home countries. Students' aspirations to study abroad took form well before they have identified a specific destination. Information and recommendations

provided by reference group members (including agents) help shape and direct student interest toward a specific destination country and institution(s). Student remembrances of the search stage suggest that consideration of destination country and institution is co-mingled to some degree. For example, a particular institution might be more attractive to a migration-minded student if it is located in a country that expedites PR.

The Importance of National Context

As I have explained previously, Canada was historically a "reluctant [international] recruiter" (McHale, 2006) but this reticence has all but disappeared. Policymaker enthusiasm for capturing a greater share of the international student market for Canada is directly related to the benefits such an increase would deliver, both to the PSEIs themselves and to the jurisdictions that host them. A 2012 study found that international students contributed nearly C$7 billion to the Canadian economy (Advisory Panel on Canada's International Education Strategy, 2012). Moreover, immigration is not a politically charged issue in Canada the way it frequently is in the United States. Polls consistently show that Canadians strongly support increases in immigration (IRPP, 2011) for many of the same reasons that policymakers do.

There is also a historical context for this enthusiasm. Attracting settlers to populate its vast expanses has been a policy priority in Canada since the arrival of the first Europeans. Succeeding imperial, colonial, and Canadian governments all viewed settlers as facts on the ground that could fortify territorial claims, accelerate Indigenous displacement, create new markets, and open hinterland areas to development (Conway, 2014). Much as early 20th marketing campaigns promoted Canada overseas as "The Last Best West" to prospective migrants, current international recruitment activities implicitly position Canada as a land of opportunity to migration-minded students.

This reframing of the recruitment transaction positions PSEIs as resettlement agencies that receive partial funding from the clients (students) themselves. While enrolled, international students have access to many of the same kinds of support services that other newcomers to Canada do, partially paid for by the students themselves (in the form of tuition and fees). When students graduate, they leave with a recognized credential and a social and professional network. It is easy to see why Canadians have concluded that international student recruitment (and retention) is a benefit for Canada and thus a policy objective. Furthermore, students' willingness to tolerate agent misbehavior provided they satisfy their most critical goals may be mirrored in some institutions' accommodation of poor agent behavior (Coffey & Perry, 2014). This illustrates the importance of national context to this study. Agent involvement may be a global phenomenon, but their ubiquity can obscure the degree to which the rationales, impetus, and support for agent use are different in other jurisdictions.

The Uses and Limitations of Metaphor

My respondents and I often resorted to metaphor in our collective effort to describe and interpret their experiences, and the metaphors we used were invariably economic ones. Recall Yasmin's (Graduate student, Pakistan, GLU) metaphor of ordering takeout or mine of the car dealer and the wary customer. In this study, market-based metaphors and language position students as consumers making choices. This framing presumes that maximizing individual choice is desirable; the consumer enjoys the free exercise of choice; the best choice is one that best meets the consumer's needs at the price she or he is willing to pay; and a higher price equals a higher level of service. While uneven or poor service is possible, in time market dynamics will push bad providers out of the marketplace. Economic rationales also shape assessment of search

outcomes—failures occur when better options were available but not provided to the client, or else when the option selected fails to meet the client's needs.

A case can be made for the utility of economic metaphors in this study, even as they privilege some elements and ignore others. Respondents unquestionably viewed both agent performance and their selection of destination country and PSEI through this lens. Recall the number of students whose evaluation of their agents' performance largely centered on the quality of the client service they provided. Moreover, all of the parties involved in recruitment justify their efforts through the use of economic rationales. What might the use of a different metaphor reveal about this phenomenon? What if we used match, as in a relationship or marriage, instead of choice? In this framing, agent involvement could be analogized to the use of a marriage broker to help find a suitable life partner. Agent-brokered matches are then similar to arranged marriages, in which a client—lacking time or experience, or else preferring assistance—seeks help from a third party. Like arranged marriages, the agent-brokered postsecondary search delivers an outcome that anticipates the needs of the collective (e.g., parents, families) rather than the couple. The bride or groom voluntarily engages in this process, persuaded that the outcome is suitable, and possibly even preferable to a love match. The metaphor of the match could illuminate different values and beliefs associated with students' familial obligations, their understanding of agent involvement, the role they expect an agent to play, and their deferral to agent recommendations. Further exploration of different metaphors could reveal previously unexamined elements of the agent phenomenon and would thus be a useful direction for further research.

Recommendations for Specific Audiences

These findings have implications for all of the key stakeholders to agent-assisted

international recruitment: students; postsecondary institutions that use agents; policymakers; and agents and agencies. In this section I briefly identify and discuss these implications and offer some recommendations.

Students. Study findings suggest that students are likely to report satisfaction with almost any outcome that sets them on a path to degree completion, work authorization, and permanent residency. While students entered the process with an interest in PSEI ranking/reputation and institutional fit, nearly all were willing to sideline these concerns once they began working with an agent. In contrast, student concerns about time to completion and costs associated with the search and education abroad persist throughout the search process. Students who regretted using an agent were more likely to cite agent fees than the quality or accuracy of agent advice.

Earlier I suggested that the agent dilemma constrains students' ability to assess the accuracy and relevance of the advice their agents provide them. One could reasonably wonder whether the power that agents exercise over students is overstated. Couldn't a student who suspected agent malfeasance simply just walk away, or decide not to go abroad? This may be the outcome for some students, but given the study's eligibility criteria requiring students to have successfully used an agent to come to Canada, such students' experiences lie outside the bounds of the current project. Even still, I suspect this is an unlikely outcome given respondents' considerable tolerance for undermatching or mismatching. I think many students conclude that nearly any outcome that successfully lands them Somewhere Else is preferable to continuing on in their home countries and this keeps them from walking away.

Assessing the outcome requires consideration of the factors that motivate students to begin the search. A student primarily interested in migration may view earning a PSE credential as an expedited path to PR. Nearly any agent can deliver this outcome, assuming Canadian policy

remains unchanged. Raising the bar by insisting on institutional fit as part of the outcome produces both short-term costs and long-term benefits for students. In the short term, students must educate themselves about postsecondary options in the destination countries that interest them. This will provide them with a clearer sense of what programs and institutions are a true best match for their talents and interests. Identifying an agent able to assist them in achieving this outcome will not be easy. Students will need to be more discerning when hiring an agent and the metrics they use to assess agent quality (e.g., fame, popularity) will need to change. Ascertaining whether an agent works on commission is more useful in predicting the agent's willingness and ability to attend to institutional fit. Hiring a commission-based agent may mean lower fees for students, but also a much more limited range of options. Students that value institutional fit must reconcile themselves to paying higher fees to hire a non-commissioned agent or else applying directly on their own. If using a commission-based agent is unavoidable, students should look for agents that represent a wide range of institutions and programs and insist on references.

While taking these steps would require students to invest more time in the short term, the long-term benefits are potentially significant. This is especially true for students with previously earned postsecondary credentials that qualify them to apply to graduate programs. Such students are more likely to command higher starting salaries with a master's degree than peers completing a diploma, certificate, or a second bachelor's degree. The costs associated with an advanced degree are often roughly comparable to programs at lower educational levels. Additional types of aid (e.g., teaching or research assistantships) may also be available at the graduate level to offset the cost to attend. For first-time postsecondary students, outcomes that better attend to institutional fit are also both realistic and achievable. Given the significant costs they incur to attend, international students deserve and should expect to be matched with an institution and

program that matches their academic talents and interests.

Postsecondary institutions that use agents. While some commentators suggest that agent misbehavior can damage PSEI reputations (Coffey & Perry, 2014), this was not born out by current study findings. Students dissatisfied with agent performance and advice did not typically blame the institutions in which they enrolled. Moreover, institutions incur little risk in enrolling students who were undermatched or mismatched by their agents. The contracts PSEIs sign with agents usually stipulate that a student must be enrolled for a minimum amount of time (often one or two semesters) in order for the agent to be paid. This means it is likely the institution has recovered this cost if a dissatisfied student withdraws or transfers after a year. The greater risk for institutions involves admitting underprepared students who collude with agents to submit falsified grade reports and test scores. While such students require additional academic support after they arrive, the tuition they pay essentially underwrites the cost for this assistance. Further, the student continues to bear a greater share of the risk as he or she progresses. If they fail to meet its academic standards, the institution can dismiss the student.

Postsecondary institutions can assist prospective international students in several ways. They can maintain and update comprehensive websites for international languages, with important, basic information available in multiple languages, tailored to both student and parent audiences. This website should include details about the admissions process, programs of study, what the credential qualifies the recipient to do, and information about common career paths for degree holders. Prospective international students and their families are often unfamiliar with the Canadian postsecondary system. Both domestic and international students and parents may be puzzled by the differences between a diploma, certificate, and a degree, especially if the nomenclature changes from institution to institution. PSEIs should develop a glossary of

common terms, identify and explain differences in educational levels, and provide a broader context to help students navigate and choose.

While institutions may find corresponding with an agent more efficient than with an inexperienced student, they should resist signing contracts that oblige students to apply through an agency. Rather, they should evaluate the international admissions process and identify ways to simplify it while attending to concerns about integrity and standards. Institutions should provide candid information about the costs and benefits of hiring an agent and make it clear that students are welcome to apply directly. Online prompts can provide automatic feedback as students complete the process, notify students when materials are missing, and confirm when an application has been successfully completed and submitted. Institutions can also invest in online chat support services to provide applicants with a means of getting specific questions answered in real time.

Lastly, institutions that use agents should routinely survey newly enrolled students about their experiences. Areas of focus should include satisfaction with agent services, the accuracy of the information provided, other information sources they found credible and useful, the amount of the fee they were charged, and their satisfaction with the decision to enroll. Institutions can use this information to identify trends, evaluate agent performance, address student concerns, and refine marketing and information campaigns.

Policymakers. Canada's student visa program allows full time students to work off campus and provides an expedited pathway to PR after graduation. This is a policy strategy meant to attract international students, but it also tempts those with no intention of studying to use it to gain entry to Canada. Instances of abuse of Canada's have prompted new regulations intended to limit the potential for fraud (CIC, 2014). Further, individuals paid to offer advice and

assistance with regard to Canadian immigration are now required to hold accreditation from a national regulatory authority (CIC, 2013). These are important steps toward safeguarding the integrity of Canada's student visa process and policymakers should continue to look for ways to improve it further.

The experiences respondents described are more resistant to policy intervention. Undermatching and mismatching a student in the service of agent profit may be unethical, but it is not unlawful. At worst, respondents received poor advice that misdirected them to institutions and programs ill suited to their talents and interests. Some students reality-tested agent recommendations and successfully evaded this outcome, but not all of them did. While some may have genuinely misled by their agent, others willingly agreed to be under- or mismatched as a strategy to gain quick entry to Canada and advance toward PR. An observer may conclude that better outcomes were available, but with nearly all participants reporting some level of satisfaction, one might also conclude there is no problem to solve.

That said, respondents' stories revealed two areas of potential concern for policymakers. The first—an incident in which an agent threatened to torpedo a student's applications unless he agreed to hire her to assist—underscores the challenges both institutions and students face in assessing agent value and monitoring agent behavior. It also suggests that concern for reputation is an insufficient deterrent to agent misconduct. All stakeholders would benefit from some kind of reporting mechanism that would allow students to report incidents of agent misbehavior and alert the institutions the agent represents. Second, many South Asian respondents described a common agent practice of aggressively steering students with earned bachelor's degrees to colleges; surely some of most incontrovertible examples of agent misdirection. It is difficult to envision a policy that could intervene to prevent this kind of mismatching, but both Canada and

students arguably benefit when a prospective migrant with a bachelor's degree in engineering is steered toward a master's degree rather than a diploma. Ongoing surveying of international students could help identify these trends as they emerge.

Study Limitations

I used an interpretivist paradigm in framing my methodological approach, which aims for contextualization and understanding, rather than generalizability and prediction. (Glesne, 2011) Several other factors related to the sample further limit generalizability of the study. These include the setting (Canada), the number of respondents (23), and the number (seven) and location (one province) of PSEIs at which they were enrolled. Fifteen of 23 respondents attended the same institution (Grant Lawrence University). All students attended institutions in which English is the language of instruction. Most (eighteen) respondents were enrolled in graduate programs and three of the remaining five had earned a bachelor's degree in their home countries. Eligibility criteria for participation required students to have hired and used an agent to assist with the search process. Therefore, the sample did not include students who chose not to use agents. Similarly, the criteria also stipulated that students be currently enrolled and attending full-time. As such, the experiences of students who chose to withdraw were not included.

Directions for Future Research

The current study is intended to contribute to a modest but growing body of literature on the role and impact of education agents in international student recruitment. Several important directions for further inquiry into the agent phenomenon suggest themselves. I did not anticipate the number of graduate student respondents in the sample, and their experiences are not usually included in current literature on agent involvement. Additional research focused explicitly on graduate students who use agents would help us to understand how their experiences are alike

and dissimilar from undergraduates. Further, the underrepresentation of undergraduates in the sample would make repeating the current study and excluding graduate students a worthwhile endeavor.

Eligibility criteria for this study required participants to have used an agent. Several respondents mentioned the (positive and negative) experiences of peers who chose not to hire and use an agent. These students' experiences were categorically excluded from the current study. Their stories are just as important (if not more so) in better understanding student choice making (especially at the predisposition stage) and in the degree to which their search outcomes differ from those of students who used agents. The study eligibility criteria also required participants to be currently enrolled. As such, the experiences of students who used an agent to study in Canada but did not persist to graduation have not been included. Given the frequency with which undermatching and mismatching occurs in agent-mediated searches, it could be important to ascertain whether this was a contributing factor when students do not complete their studies.

Findings suggest that students who used non-commission based agents worked with their agents to develop lists of target institutions that were highly responsive to their academic, career, and personal goals. Their stories made them outliers in this study, but they also suggest that better outcomes and agent involvement aren't mutually exclusive. A study focusing on the experiences of students who used non-commissioned agents could surface potential strategies to make such outcomes more likely.

Canada provided to be an interesting site for this current study, but Canada is only one of several countries that educate the majority of outbound international students. Repeating the study in a different country might help us to better understand both the role immigration and visa

policies have in stimulating or displacing student interest and the interface between these policies and agent-mediate recruitment. That said, one needn't look outside Canada to identify a different cultural context for future study. A recent survey of Canadian education administrators found that recruitment practices by Francophone institutions differ markedly from Anglophone institutions (Coffey & Perry, 2014). Future research in this area could involve a study of the experiences of international students attending Canadian French-language PSEIs.

Conclusion

In September of 2012, I interviewed a Canadian postsecondary admissions officer as part of a pilot study. She had previously worked as a consular official overseas. In the course of the interview, she described a scenario she had encountered while working abroad. Student visa fraud was rampant in the jurisdiction where she worked. This made visa processing a painful, protracted, and often unproductive experience for both applicants and consular officers. Not surprisingly, visa rejection rates were quite high. A bright spot was the presence of an education agent in the region whose professional ethics were beyond reproach. Over time, consular officers had come to trust her. As such, her clients' visa applications were almost always swiftly approved. She traded on this reputation, charging students an exorbitant fee to prepare their applications. Her clients willingly paid, aware that they had a modest chance at best of securing a visa otherwise.

Who benefits from this arrangement, and at whose expense? Certainly the visa officer benefits. A difficult administrative task is made both easier and faster with no additional risk to process integrity. Both the recruiting institution and Canada benefit when another full fee-paying international student is cleared to matriculate. The agent unquestionably benefits. Lastly, the student benefits. They paid handsomely to ensure that the process worked in their favor, and it

did. Everyone is happy with this outcome, which was entirely underwritten by the student who initiated the transaction. Are better outcomes available for more students if we remove the agent from the transaction? What would need to change? What new obligations would this create for the remaining stakeholders? Are they willing and resourced to carry out these obligations?

Coffey and Perry (2014) have noted that the international recruitment industry involves multiple stakeholders whose interests sometimes align and at other times diverge. Successful outcomes thus involve circumstances in which stakeholders sacrifice some priorities to advance others. Where I might privilege student well being in such transactions, not all stakeholders would, nor would they all define it in the same way. For example, many study respondents would dispute my conclusion that they were not well served by their agents. If a search outcome results in poor institutional fit, yet provides a migration-minded student with a clear path to PR, has the student been well served? Is the outcome evidence of a kind of collusion that marginalizes student well being? If all stakeholders—including students—are willing participants and they all report satisfaction with the outcome, is there a problem?

This story illustrates both the complexity of the agent phenomenon and the difficulty in reaching quick, simple conclusions about the ethics of agent use. Evidence of pervasive agent privileging of profit over their student clients' welfare is concerning. Agent involvement often results in squandered potential (for students and the countries that hope to retain them) when talented students are undermatched or mismatched. Agents routinely subvert institutional admissions policies (e.g., submitting personal statements their clients did not write), charge high fees in exchange for modest efforts, and constrain student choice making. Yet most study participants reported satisfaction with their search outcome and their agents' performance. All but two enrolled in accredited, reputable, and well-resourced postsecondary educations—surely

an acceptable outcome. Absent agent intervention, it seems highly unlikely that these fifteen respondents would have found their way to Grant Lawrence—a decent if unremarkable institution that (by all respondents' accounts) is providing them with a solid education. Students received one-on-one attention and guidance from their agents. It seems unlikely postsecondary education could ever provide this level of high-touch support for prospective candidates. For all of these reasons, an outright ban on agent use in international recruitment seems both ill considered and unrealistic. That said, postsecondary institutions and policymakers must commit to act consistently in favor of efforts to exclude bad actors and to make better search outcomes more possible and likely.

The ubiquity of agent use coupled with the paucity of scholarly research into this phenomenon make this an especially promising area for future research. When investigating the experience of international students who used agents, it is important to consider how their needs and preferences inform the search trajectory as well as how agent involvement often compels them to prioritize some over others. Future research that investigates the experiences of students from populations that were underrepresented in the study sample will further expand our understanding of this phenomenon.

APPENDICES

Appendix A:

Recruitment Flier

Figure 4 Recruitment Flier

Appendix B:

Research Participant Information and
Informed Consent Form

Study Title: The Role Student Choice Plays in Agent-Mediated College Searches

Principal
Investigator: Dr. Ann E. Austin, Professor in Educational Administration
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Additional
Researcher: Robert Coffey, Doctoral Student
Michigan State University
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734-255-9358 coffeyr1@msu.edu

PURPOSE OF RESEARCH:

- The visiting scholar/researcher from Michigan State University, Robert Coffey, is conducting a qualitative research study about the experiences of international students who used education agents to help them gain admission to Canadian post-secondary institutions.

- The study invites perspectives from international students who are currently enrolled at Canadian colleges or universities in Windsor or Toronto.

- As the participant, please contact Robert Coffey (coffeyr1@msu.edu) to express interest in the study and arrange an on-site, in-person, individual interview.

- You **must** meet the following minimum criteria to be eligible for participation:

    - Presently be enrolled full-time at a college or university in Toronto or Windsor, Ontario, Canada
      A non-Canadian citizen or permanent resident

- You will have an opportunity to schedule a mutually agreed upon time to participate in an in-person interview lasting approximately 45-60 minutes. Following this interview, you will be invited to schedule a second in-person interview lasting approximately 45-60 minutes.

- The results of the study will be presented in the researcher's dissertation, at scholarly conferences, and publications.

PROCEDURES:

- You will be asked to answer semi-structured, open-ended questions regarding your experience with using an education agent to help you secure admission to your university.

- You will be asked to complete a participant information form at the conclusion of the interview.

- You will have access to the completed dissertation upon request.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS:

- Since this is a relatively new area of study, with little research or understanding, you are contributing to enriching knowledge regarding the factors that motivate international students to work with education agents.

- By sharing stories you may contribute to a greater understanding of your own experience with using agents.

- It is possible that you may not benefit from participation in the present study.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS:

- You may experience the following risks or discomforts:

    - There is a minimum risk for invasion of privacy since most of the communication between you and the researcher will occur in person.

    - Several precautions will be taken to protect your confidentiality as a participant. You will have an opportunity to select a pseudonym to maintain privacy of your identity.

    - Only the researcher, Robert Coffey, the dissertation advisor, Ann E. Austin, and Michigan State University's Human Research Protection Program will have access to a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet with contact information corresponding to your pseudonym. Such information will only be used to contact you in case of an emergency. The participant information form (hard copies) will be stored for a minimum of three (3) years in a secured cabinet in the researcher's home in the U.S. and in Ann E. Austin's office location in a secured cabinet. The electronic spreadsheet will be stored on Robert Coffey's personal password protected computer for a minimum of three (3) years.

    - There are no potential conflicts of interest that are known at the present time.

PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

- Information produced by this study will be confidential and private to the maximum extent allowable by law.

  As the participant, you will have the opportunity to select a pseudonym, and indicate race, nationality, and gender markers of identity that you would like the researcher to use. Transcriptions will be recorded on a separate electronic document (Microsoft Word) without any personal identifiable markers, such as name, race, college or university, etc. Transcriptions will only be accessible to the researcher Robert Coffey, the dissertation advisor, Ann E. Austin, and Michigan State University's Human Research Protection Program. The transcriptions will be stored for a minimum of three (3) years in a secured cabinet in the researcher's home in the U.S., and in Ann E. Austin's office location in a secured cabinet. The digital voice recordings will be stored on Robert Coffey's personal password protected computer for a minimum of three (3) years.

- The data will be used for the pilot study manuscript. If the data is used in publications or for teaching purposes, only self-identified labels by participants or selected pseudonyms will be used.

COSTS & COMPENSATION

- You must have access to a telephone and/or email to initially set up a meeting with the researcher. There are no additional anticipated personal expenses for this study.

- You will receive a gift card with a value equivalent to C$10 at the conclusion of the first interview. If you choose to participate in a second interview, you will receive a gift card with a value equivalent to C$15 at the conclusion.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

- You are under no obligation to participate in this study. Participation in this study is entirely voluntary.

- By voluntarily entering this study, you do not waive any of your legal rights.

- You may withdraw your participation at any time without prejudice. My information will be discarded at the time of withdrawal.

- You have the option to not answer any question.
- You have had the opportunity to ask questions and have received satisfactory answers.

- Total length of your participation will be approximately 90-120 minutes (45-60 minutes for each interview; total of two (2) interviews. You will have the opportunity to participate in follow-up interviews (in person, telephone, or via Skype) upon mutually

agreed-upon interest.

- It is expected that 18-24 international students will be enrolled in this study.

CONTACT INFORMATION FOR QUESTIONS AND CONCERNS:

- Should you have any questions about anything relative to your participation in this project, you may contact Mr. Robert Coffey, 1418 Edgewood Ave., Ann Arbor, MI 48103, by phone (734) 255-9358, or email: coffeyr1@msu.edu or Dr. Ann E. Austin, Professor in Educational Administration, Erickson Hall, 620 Farm Lane, Rm 419A, Michigan State University, by phone: (517) 355-6757, or email: aaustin@msu.edu.

- If you have questions or concerns about your role and rights as a research participant, would like to obtain information or offer input, or would like to register a complaint about this study, you may contact, anonymously if you wish, the Michigan State University's Human Research Protection Program by phone: (517) 355-2180, fax: (517) 432-4503, email: irb@msu.edu, or postal mail: Olds Hall, 408 W. Circle Drive, Rm 202, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI 48824 USA.

INFORMED CONSENT AGREEMENT:

- You are indicating your voluntary agreement to participate in this study by beginning this interview and signing this consent form.

- You would like to be in this research study and agree to be audio-recorded during this interview.

_____ _____

Signature / Print Name Date

Appendix C:

Interview Protocol

Participant (Pseudonym) _____

Participant Self-Label Gender _____

Participant Self-Label Race/Ethnicity _____

Participant Self-Label Nationality _____

University (Pseudonym) _____

Date/Time of Interview: _____

Note: The interview protocol below identifies the primary interview questions for the present study, however because this will be done conversationally there may be minor adjustments made to the questions based upon the flow of the interview.

INTERVIEW # 1

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study. My plan is to use what I learn through these interviews to help shape my doctoral dissertation. I may also present the results at academic conferences, and in publications.

As you know, I'm interested in understanding the experiences of international students who used an education agent to help them apply to university in Canada. I am particularly interested in why students choose to work with agents, how you worked together, what the decision-making process was like, and whether you were satisfied with the experience.

Ideally, I would like for us to meet twice, for two 45-60 minute interviews. In this first meeting, I'd like to get to know you better and learn about how you decided to come to Canada. In the second meeting, we can talk more about what it was like for you to use an education agent and how you feel about the experience. I will also audio record the interview, if you agree.

The *Participant Information and Informed Consent Form* that I've forwarded you in advance of our meeting provides information about this research study and describes the terms of your participation. No one other than me (Robert Coffey) will have access to your responses except for my dissertation advisor (Ann E. Austin) and Michigan State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). As well, to protect your confidentiality, I will change the name of your university. On the *Participant Information and Informed Consent Form*, I ask that you select a pseudonym in place of your name, and indicate the gender, race/ethnicity, and nationality terms that you'd prefer I use in reference to your identities.

Feel free to stop the interview or skip a question if you feel uncomfortable. If you don't have any

questions at this time, shall we begin?

CENTRAL QUESTIONS:

1. **BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

   Probes:
   -Tell me a little about yourself.
   -Tell me about your family.
   -Tell me about your friends.
   -How would your family describe you?
   -How would your friends describe you?

2. **DECISION TO SEEK POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION ABROAD**

   Probes:
   -Tell me about how you made the decision to go abroad for your university.
   -Who did you talk to about this idea? (Family? Friends? Teachers?)
   -What did they think about it?
   -Who do you think had the most influence on your decision to go abroad?
   -What (academic, personal, career) goals did you have in seeking to go abroad?

3. **PRELIMINARY IDENTIFICATION OF CANADA AS A DESTINATION**

   Probes:
   -Tell me about how you made the decision to consider Canada as a destination.
   -What were you looking for in a destination country?
   -What qualities did you attribute to Canada that you considered desirable?
   -Who did you talk to about this idea? (Family? Friends? Teachers?) What did they think about it?
   -Who do you think had the most influence on your decision to consider Canada as a destination?

4. **PRELIMINARY IDENTIFICATION OF TARGET PSE INSTITUTIONS**

   Probes:
   -When you first started thinking about going abroad for university, were there any specific schools that interested you?
   -How did you learn about these institutions?
   -What qualities were you looking for in a university?
   -What qualities did you attribute to these institutions that you considered desirable?
   -Who did you talk to about these institutions? (Family, Friends? Teachers?) What did they think about it?

CONCLUSION OF INTERVIEW # 1

I have a few final questions about your experience with this interview.

Probes:
-Were any of the questions confusing?
-Were any of the questions hard to answer?
-Did any of the questions make you uncomfortable?
-Did I ask questions about the issues related to this topic that you think are most important? Is there anything I didn't ask about that you think I should have?
-Do you have any questions for me at this time?

Thanks so much for your time today. I really enjoyed hearing your story. I hope you are interested in meeting for a second interview. As I mentioned earlier, in the second interview I will focus specifically on what it was like for you to use an education agent and how you feel about the experience. I will provide you a list of questions ahead of time so you can feel prepared and comfortable. I will also audio record the interview, if you agree. Again, thank you for your time.

INTERVIEW # 2

Thank you for agreeing to participate in a second interview. In our conversation today, I hope we can talk about what it was like for you to use an education agent and how you feel about the experience. I will be referencing the list of questions I forwarded you, so feel free to follow along if you'd like! I will also audio record the interview, if you agree.

You may remember the *Participant Information and Informed Consent Form* that we discussed in our last meeting. No one other than me (Robert Coffey) will have access to your responses except for my dissertation advisor (Ann E. Austin) and Michigan State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). As well, to protect your confidentiality, I will change the name of your university. I will continue to use the pseudonym you chose at the beginning. Feel free to stop the interview or skip a question if you feel uncomfortable. If you don't have any questions at this time, shall we begin?

5. **DECISION TO USE AN AGENT**

   Probes:
   -Tell me about how the decision got made to hire an agent.
   -How involved were you in the decision to use an agent?
   -What did you consider to be the advantages and drawbacks of using an agent?

6. **SELECTION, HIRING OF AGENT**

   Probes:
   -Tell me about how the decision got made to hire the agent you used.
   -How did you first learn about this particular agent?
   -What qualities did this agent have that you found desirable?

-Did you meet/talk with this agent before making the decision to hire them?
- How involved were you in the decision to use an agent? How involved were others?
-What services did you contract with this agent to provide?
-Were you able to select the services you wanted or were the services bundled?
-How did the agent describe their fee structure?
-What did the agent charge?

7. **STUDENT-AGENT INTERACTIONS**

Probes:
-Tell me about what interacting with your agent was like.
-What questions did the agent have for you?
-What questions did you have for the agent?
-What did you talk about?
-Did you share your (personal, academic, career) goals with the agent?
-What advice or recommendations did the agent offer?
-What factors do you think most influenced the agent's advice or recommendations?
-Who interacted the most with the agent?
-What did you think about the way the agent interacted with you?
-What did you think about the agent's recommendations?

8. **SATISFACTION WITH INSTITUTION**

Probes:
- Do you feel the institution is a good fit?
-How satisfied are you with the outcome of your search?
-To what extent do you believe the agent played a role in achieving this outcome?

9. **SATISFACTION WITH AGENT**

Probes:
-How do you feel about your decision to work with an agent?
-Would you recommend that a friend interested in coming to Canada for university use an agent?
-Would you recommend the specific agent you used?

CONCLUSION OF INTERVIEW

I have a few final questions about your thoughts about our interview.

Probes:
-Were any of the questions confusing?
-Were any of the questions hard to answer?
-Did any of the questions make you uncomfortable?
-Did I ask questions about the issues related to this topic that you think are most important? Is there anything I didn't ask about that you think I should have?

-Do you have any questions for me at this time?

I have any further questions, would it be OK if I set up another time to meet with you briefly in person? If you prefer, I can also email you my questions, call you by phone, or we can set up a Skype meeting.

Again, thank you for your time.

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