

UK's bread and butter - Capitalising on the strong East Asia markets

"We're selling education, not Mars bars."

Vincenzo Raimo, Director of the International Office at University of Nottingham, did more than state the obvious in his keynote speech at the first British Council International Education Agent Conference in Guangzhou.

A vocal supporter of the work of education recruitment agents, and an advocate for greater transparency in the industry at home and abroad, he was emphasizing the point of shared responsibility.

The increasing numbers of East Asian students choosing to shape their futures by studying in the UK only get one shot at it, with no refunds and no second chances. Both agents and universities should place ethics before profits and work together to ensure students are given appropriate guidance at each stage of the recruitment process.

The conference, featuring 160 delegates from 12 East Asia countries and the UK, is the first of its kind to be organised by the British Council. With at least 40 per cent of East Asia students who choose to study abroad employing the services of agents, the industry is playing an increasingly influential role in the international operations of UK universities. The event served as a timely opportunity to bring together education agents and organisations from around the region, together with International Directors from UK HE institutions, to share best practice, market insights and lend credence and cohesion to a rapidly growing but often-misunderstood industry.

A dozen thought-provoking conference sessions sparked lively debate. Adapting to future trends is a big challenge for the industry; utilizing technology effectively, especially social networking and other communication channels, was the topic of a session by Simon Young, a Global Relations expert, who posited the need for organisations to turn students and alumni into 'marketers'.

But while adopting technology trends is critical for the industry, the old-fashioned value of interpersonal face-to-face exchange underpinned the whole event, with agents able to meet with international directors, competitors, industry watchers and business analysts, and forge links for future collaboration.

"Face to face exchange is conducive to maintaining a healthier relationship between countries and organisations," said Mr Shao Wei, Secretary-General for CEAIE (China Education Association for International Exchange), in his opening speech. China is thus far the runaway success story for the region and the UK with the highest number of international students in the UK coming from China. Dr Shao Wei reminded all present that sending students to study abroad is a very high priority for the Chinese government, and one that has positive repercussions, such as boosting bilateral trade between the UK and China.

With UK immigration policy and its impact on international student numbers a key issue for all present, figures from the UKBA (UK Border Agency) made for welcome news. British Council's Ms Jazreel Goh, Director of Education Marketing for China, presented hot off the press statistics showing the number of Tier 4 and Student Visas issued to East Asia students has increased significantly in the last two years. China, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand and Malaysia have all posted increases of between 5 and 15 per cent.

But Vincenzo warned the industry of complacency, especially now that the UK government has eased quotas on domestic students, and raised fees to a point that, in some subject areas, is only slightly lower than those charged to international students. "The education landscape is changing rapidly and today's students are looking for real value for money and a big return on their investment," said Vincenzo, driving home the need for agents to remain competitive in the market.

Vincenzo also warned of potential scandals in the industry, and the need for transparency in terms of costs and commissions on both sides. “I think the student has the right to know how much the agent is receiving and what influence that might have on how they influence him or her. At a minimum I think UK universities should be publishing their commission rates, but no one is rushing to do that.”

Looking at new opportunities in the future, a major growth area covered is the booming East Asian TNE cross-market, as governments in the region shift resources to local capacity building. Ms Goh expects to see a rise in students from East Asia travelling inter-regionally to do off-shore programs, which should mean that opportunities will arise for agents from across the region to work together for mutual benefit.

Equally, a handful of countries in East Asia were singled out for strong future growth. Both Indonesia and the Philippines can expect upturns in student numbers going abroad in the short and medium term, with Myanmar representing long term opportunity.

While the Tier 4 numbers will come as welcome news to UK education providers, what are students in East Asia actually thinking? How do their aspirations, doubts and preconceptions differ from one country to another? What exactly are students thinking when selecting an international education?

Drilling down the various findings of British Council’s Student Insight Survey, the overriding single factor governing an East Asian student’s choice when selecting a country for international study is, *quality of education*. Articulation of ‘quality’ starts the minute the student decides to embark on overseas study – from the quality of service, information provision, student experience to academic quality in the UK.

The UK already educates the second highest number of international students studying abroad, remarkable for a country of its size. So key to positioning the UK Education brand to capitalize on this growth, no matter whom the target, is quality. “Quality is the watchword of British education,” said Ms Goh, “and this is something we will not compromise.”

ENDS



The conference, the first of its kind to be organised by the British Council featured a room full of delegates from 12 East Asia countries and the UK.



Attendees actively participated in the conference



Panel discussion: New partnerships that build capacity: agents and UK institutions



Mr Simon Young - Principal, Global Relations syENGAGE and Social media consultant, discusses a new digital recipe for recruitment success



Panel Discussion: Professional development



The audience enjoyed a closing plenary by Sebastian Terry who shared his amazing life story in completing a list of feats – ending the conference with a strong 'learning and reflecting' message.

Notes:

- **The British Council East Asia Agent Conference**

As international education providers in the UK recognise the importance of agents, and agents across East Asia realise the challenge and need for change, the British Council organised the inaugural East Asia Agent Conference to address issues and create new opportunities.

The East Asia Agent Conference was held in Guangzhou, China on 26th March, aiming to increase student mobility between East Asia and UK, to monitor, develop and improve agent industry standards and services, to enhance public confidence in agent industry, to help UK institutions to understand the current market trends in East Asia, increase student recruitment with new partnerships, and develop internationally relevant local strategies as well as to promote interactions among the government's supervisory body, education agents and UK institutions.

The conference was preceded by **the East Asia Agent Awards**, which is an awards programme organised by the British Council in East Asia to recognise and promote excellence in education agent enterprise and endeavour across East Asia. This was the inaugural British Council Agent Awards and will be organised biennially.

Through three categories – the best partner award, the most innovative award, and the most entrepreneurial award, the Awards showcased education agents who have been achieving outstanding results and who have demonstrated the highest level of commitment to UK-EA relations in education.

The Agent Awards were open to all education agents operating in mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Japan, South Korea, Myanmar, Philippines, Vietnam and Thailand, and over 200 applications were received.

Programme:

The East Asia education agent conference 2013

25-26 March 2013 | Guangzhou | Hilton Guangzhou Tianhe

Time	Topic
08:00-08:45	Registration
08:45-08:55	<p>Welcome speech</p> <p>Speakers: Mr Angus Bjarnason - British Council Area Director South China Mr Shao Wei- Secretary-General, China Education Association for International Exchange</p>
08:55-09:10	<p>The Examination Markets in East Asia</p> <p>Speaker: Ms Angela Hennelly- Examinations Manager for East Asia, British Council</p>
09:10-09:40	<p>UK Education in East Asia: trends, challenges and cooperation</p> <p>Speaker: Ms Jazreel Goh - Director Education Marketing China, the British Council</p>
09:40-10:20	<p>The road to excellence: building successful agencies in a competitive and globalised world</p> <p>Speaker: Mr Vincenzo Raimo - Director International Office, the University of Nottingham</p>
10:40-11:20	<p>Panel discussion 1</p> <p>New partnerships that build capacity: agents and UK institutions</p> <p>Panel:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mr Bryan Yeo - General Manager of UK Education Institute South Korea • Ms Joanna D'Ettorre Leung - International Education Consultants' Association Hong Kong • Ms Penprapa Vudhivate - the President of TIECA Thailand • Mr Chris Francis - Strategic Development Director of EIC China <p>Chair: Mr Vincenzo Raimo - Director International Office, the University of Nottingham</p>
11:20-12:00	<p>Panel discussion 2</p> <p>Graduates for East Asia</p> <p>Panel:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mr Andrew P Disbury -- Director of the International Office, Leeds Metropolitan University • Mr Calvin Lam – Senior Consultant, Michael Page International

	Chair: Ms Jazreel Goh - Director Education Marketing China, the British Council
12:00-12:05	Summary for morning session & briefing for afternoon session
14:00-14:50	4 Parallel sessions Parallel session 1 Grand ball room A new digital recipe for recruitment success Panel: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mr Sam Flemming - Founder and President of CIC, the key provider of social business intelligence • Mr Simon Young - Principal, Global Relations syENGAGE and Social media consultant Chair: Ms May Huang - Education e-marketing manager, the British Council China
	Parallel session 2 M1 conference room Agent business : diversification and cross country cooperation among agents from East Asia region Panel: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ms Ha Nguyen - Director Study Link Vietnam • Mr Udaya Halim - Managing director, King's-IBEC (Indonesia-Britain Education Center) • Mr Stephen Ho - Founder and Chairman of MacGregor Education Group Hong Kong Chair: Mr John Quirk - Director of International Affairs, University of Central Lancashire
14:50-15:40	Parallel session 3 Grand ball room The new Chinese students Panel: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mr Andrew P Disbury -- Director of the International Office, Leeds Metropolitan University • Mr Jeremy Chan - project leader, SK Holdings Chair: Ms Jazreel Goh - Director Education Marketing China, the British Council
	Parallel session 4 M1 conference room Professional development Panel: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ms Jayanthi Thevarajah - Senior Manager, Counsellor Training & Client Development, IDP Education Malaysia • Mr Cameron Allen - founder of Hands On Education Consultants Thailand

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mr Ma Zhihai - Vice President of Shinyway Education, China <p>Chair: Ms Francine Dawson - Deputy director higher education, the British Council Malaysia</p>	
16:00-16:30	<p>UK student visa policy update</p> <p>Speaker: Mr Mike Machin-Operations manager (China, Mongolia and DPRK), UK Border Agency</p>	Grand ball room
16:30-17:30	<p>Closing plenary</p> <p>Keynote speech 5: 100 things</p> <p>Speaker: Mr Sebastian Terry</p>	Grand ball room