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## Education agents as competitiveness enhancers of Australian universities by internationalisation facilitation

### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** The objective of this paper is to explore the role of education agents as drivers of competitiveness of Australian Universities by facilitating internationalisation.

**Research Design & Methods:** The paper presents an analysis of semi structured interviews from two University international officers, an education officer with Victorian Government and an education agent. This set of primary data and a comprehensive literature review served as a stimulus for this investigation.

**Findings:** It is evident that the agents play an extremely vital role in the internationalisation process and the four key themes that are identified from the interviews are Market Knowledge, Network Facilitators, Financial Interest and Reliance and Trust factor.

**Implications & Recommendations:** The paper proposes several key concepts/themes that could be used to frame future investigations into the role of education agents in the internationalisation of higher education. The higher education providers should not neglect the importance of the knowledge that the education agent may offer for recruiting international students or even to establish an offshore operation.

**Contribution & Value Added:** The originality of this work lies in finding the various themes which are essential to be looked at by the higher education providers in order to further utilise the potential of education agents in the internationalisation process.

**Article type:** research article

**Keywords:** Intermediary; education agents; higher education; internationalization; education export; international competitiveness; recruiting international students

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## INTRODUCTION

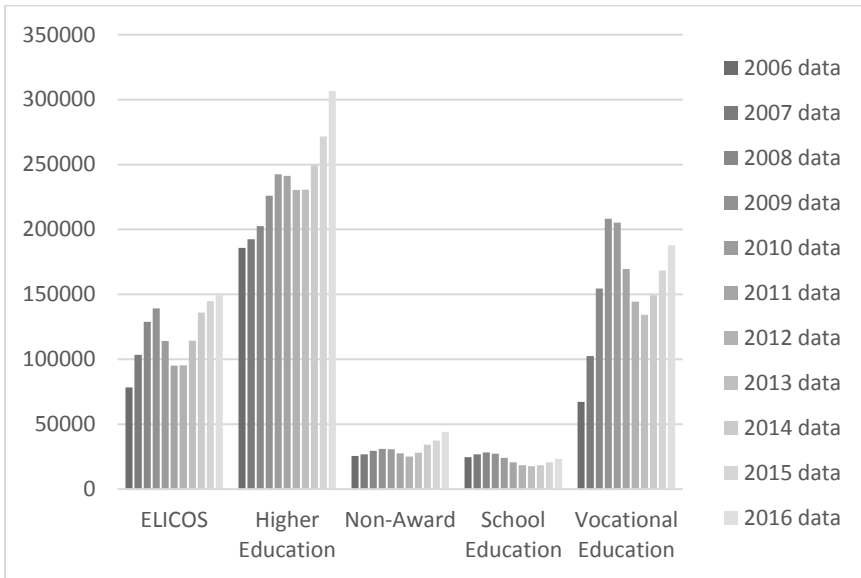
Internationalisation of higher education providers can be considered as an effective mean to measure their success and competitiveness. The implication of revenue generation from this internationalisation process has a massive impact in terms of operations of the providers. Often, the role of intermediaries is forgotten or neglected in this process. The literature review, especially Czinkota et al. 2009, and Dunning's Eclectic Paradigm are examined for the theoretical basis of this paper. The international competitiveness of the Australian higher education context provides an avenue for investigation. The current knowledge of the area focuses on the international entry mode choices of higher education providers. It also addresses factors such as market potential, location familiarity, networking, international experience etc. Most of the research examining the internationalisation of the higher education sector has largely focused to-date on providing descriptive overviews of internationalisation activities (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Chin & Ching, 2009; Horie, 2002), the various rationales behind internationalising (Fang, 2012), and internationalisation of the curriculum development (Svensson & Wihlborg, 2010).

However, there is scarcity in literature about the themes which influence the role of intermediaries in the internationalisation process of higher education. There is limited discussion about understanding these themes and use them as part of practical implications to the related parties. This paper explores the factors that influence the internationalisation process and the role of intermediaries in it. This is done mainly to identify the role of intermediaries and the key themes that affects the reliance of the intermediaries in the process of internationalisation. Findings are drawn from semi structured interviews conducted by representatives of key stakeholders, using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The following section of literature review explains Dunning's Eclectic Paradigm. The paper then moves on to explain the role of intermediaries and the factors that influence their ability to influence the recruitment of international students. Following that the research questions are formulated to address the particular gaps uncovered by literature, and the methodology used is introduced. A detailed analysis and discussion reflects the responses gained from the primary data collection and how it relates with the theoretical knowledge and the practical implications. In the conclusion, areas of concern and improvement in terms higher education internationalisation, and the role of agents are discussed. Finally, the paper is concluded by discussing limitation and areas for future research.

**International competitiveness of the Australian higher education sector**

The purpose of this section is to look at the available literature focusing on the internationalisation of higher education providers (i.e. universities).



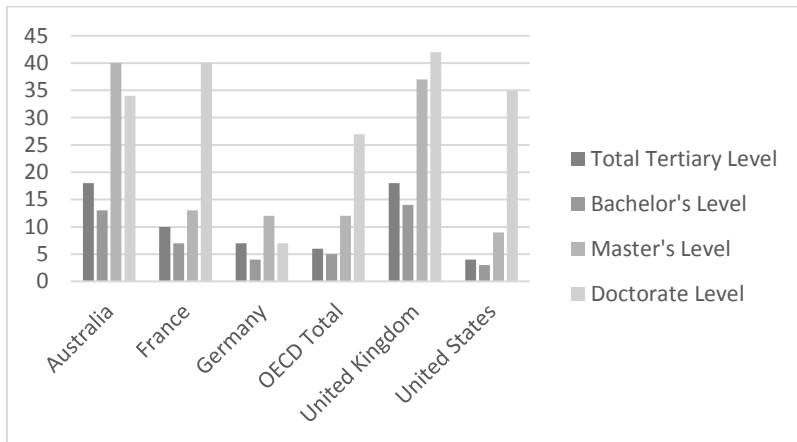
**Figure 1: Trend of international student enrolment in Australia**

(Source – Provider Registration and International Student Management System; International student data 2016, Department of Education and Training, Australian Government)

This section provides an overview of the global and Australian context of higher education competitiveness taking the perspective of international student movements. Figure 1 above clearly shows the increase in international student enrolment in Australia, especially in the higher education sector. The paper examines studies on the internationalisation of higher education with reference to Czinkota et al.’s (2009) study. It discusses the overview of Dunning’s eclectic paradigm specifying the issues within the paradigm and further discussing the role of intermediaries in context of the key themes like market knowledge, network facilitators, reliance and trust factor, financial interest of agents etc. Finally, the chapter looks at the research question and how the conceptual backgrounds lead to the research questions.

Competitiveness can be defined as a portfolio attributes indicating an enhanced performance of a particular entity in comparison to others (Perényi, 2016; Porter, 1985; Wach, 2014). As a key, comparable, international performance measure, internationalisation (international student numbers and revenues) emerges as indicator of international competitiveness of the education sector.

Considering the size, reputation and diversity the U.S remains the leader as a choice of destination of higher education for international students. However, Australian higher education institutions have shown strong growth in proactively recruiting and retaining international students. According to the OECD data (refer to Figure 2 below), Australia increased international student enrolment at the tertiary level institution from 12.5% in 2000 to 18.3% in 2014. In comparison, the share for U.S institutions remained at 4%.



**Figure 2: Share of international students by level of tertiary education (%)**  
 (Source: prepared based on OECD (2016))

Australia has a clear focus on international education and has formulated The National Strategy for International Education 2025 (Rahul & Di, 2016). This strategy will enable Australia’s international education sector to be more adaptive, innovative and globally engaged. It will strengthen our internationally recognised education system, increase global partnerships and drive collaboration with local communities and international partners. The National Strategy has been developed in consultation with the sector and across all levels of government. It further states that “New modes of education delivery and new national and international partnerships will allow more students to have access to an Australian education. Although onshore learning in Australia will remain a

core component of Australian international education, learning will increasingly occur in-market and online” (Rahul & Di, 2016).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Overview of university internationalisation

There is a scarcity of studies on the internationalisation process of higher education providers has been undertaken utilising international business theory with a common assumption that the higher education sector is “following the classic pattern of internationalisation familiar in business” (Healey, 2008, p.334). This is despite the constant increase in international activities by universities. Most research examining the internationalisation of the higher education sector has largely focused to-date on providing descriptive overviews of internationalisation activities (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Chin & Ching, 2009; Horie, 2002), the various rationales behind internationalising (Fang, 2012), and internationalisation of the curriculum development (Svensson & Wihlborg, 2010). These studies do not focus on the reasons why universities choose particular methods of internationalisation (and their associated entry mode choices) and what role does an intermediary play, if any, in this process. It becomes quite relevant to find out what type of role do the intermediary play in the internationalisation process and which key factors of the intermediary need to be examined more to understand their effect in the role of internationalisation process of higher education. Some of the factors that could be looked upon are like market knowledge, location advantage, gaining trust of the students and parents, strong networking connections etc.

From an investigation of the extant literature on the internationalisation of higher education, one particular study, Czinkota et al. (2009), extends beyond the perspectives mentioned above and has utilised international business theory to explain the internationalisation of universities. Czinkota et al. (2009) examined and tested a range of key variables associated with Dunning’s eclectic framework influencing market entry strategies of 62 US business schools (teaching MBA programs). The study found that for successful expansion into overseas markets, ownership (multi-nationality and product differentiation), location (market potential) and internalisation (contractual risk) variables were significant in determining the type of entry mode selected.

Australia has a vigorously entrepreneurial approach to growing its international enrolment. It has been described as “the leader in international student recruitment” (Adams, Levanthal & Connelly, 2012). Australia was an early adopter of the agent-recruitment model. Agents have been recruiting for all levels of the Australian education system since the late 1960s, when

Australian universities collectively established one of the first recruitment agencies (Moodie, 2011).

The importance of the key factors in the role of intermediaries (education agents) for internationalisation of higher education are not being examined in the literature to a great extent. There is no recommendation nor proposal to leverage on these factors of the intermediaries (education agent) which will further benefit both the higher education provider and the education agent in strengthening the partnership in the internationalisation process. This proposed study seeks to leverage from existing studies on the internationalisation of higher education, and specifically Czinkota et al.'s (2009) study, examining the role of intermediaries in this internationalisation process. The importance of intermediaries and networks in the internationalisation process is widely recognised in the extant literature (see for example, Coviello & McAuley, 1999; Moen & Servais, 2002; Chetty & Wilson, 2003; Chetty & Campbell-Hunt, 2004; Loane et al., 2004; Jones & Coviello, 2005; Loane & Bell, 2006). Export promotion organisations (EPOs), in particular, are considered as key intermediaries to support the process of internationalisation by intermediating between firm and foreign markets (Wheeler, 1990) and by bridging the divide between the capabilities of entrepreneurs and small firms and foreign market opportunities (Wilkinson, 2006).

The role of intermediaries will form the theoretical underpinning to this study when examining the internationalisation of the higher education sector. From the research of (Magyar & Robinson-Pant, 2013), we learned that agencies and agents played a significant role in filtering information from UK universities, filling in application forms and translating or even writing personal statements. It became apparent that the agent was involved in a two-way process of conveying information provided by universities about their courses, and also mediating the students' initial interactions with the university.

In the next section, a brief outline will be presented of the relevant literature (Dunning's eclectic paradigm) in which this study is grounded, building from extant literature, through identifying key themes within both the internationalisation and intermediary literature.

### **Overview of Dunning's eclectic paradigm**

The next section focuses on the three key factors of Dunning's Eclectic Paradigm and the associated issues with them. It also extrapolates the role of networks, market knowledge and strategic decision. The explanation of these factors is contextualised within the broader context of the role of intermediaries/education agents in the internationalisation process of higher education.

### **Firm specific factors**

Firm specific ownership factors are particularly applicable in the internationalisation process with the pressurised environment and competition facing the higher education providers. It emphasizes on the access to financial resources to continue the operational aspect of the providers.

**International Experience-** International knowledge and experience can be considered as an invaluable source of competitive advantage when internationalising, and is linked with an increased preference for sole ownership. According to Blomstermo, Sharma (2006) there is a direct relationship between experience and higher control entry modes. A firm's foreign market entry is often explained as a process of increasing accumulation of experimental knowledge about business partners, technical factors, human and administrative resources (Blomstermo et al., 2006). According to Czinkota (2009), the greater the international experience – the greater a firm would be likely to choose an equity based entry choice mode to a foreign market.

**Entrepreneurial Orientation-** An entrepreneurial orientation allows organisations to see and exploit international business opportunities when combined with other resources and capabilities (Anderson & Wictor, 2003; Knight & Cavusgil, 2004; Oviatt & McDougall, 1995). Entrepreneurial oriented organisation accepts to tolerate the risk associated with entry mode linked to the use of more resource intensive ownership firms (Jones & Coviello, 2005). When a firm operates in a new foreign market, it is likely to encounter important liabilities such as the liability of expansion, the liability of newness and the liability of foreignness (Cuervo-Czurra, Maloney & Manrakhan, 2007). All these liabilities are directly related to the entrepreneurial nature of the firm that assist the firm to progress irrespective of the nature of liability that may come on the way.

**Reputation-** In the process of exchange relationships, reputable organisations can gain access to resources that are otherwise difficult and this being a crucial part of the internationalisation process (Fombrun & Van Riel, 2004). This idea contradicts the fact that some reputable organisation will be reluctant to be associated with another partner in the host country not having similar reputation standard. In that case, the organisation would like to protect its reputation by adopting a higher control entry mode – such as sole ownership-when entering the host country (Ekeledo & Shivakumar, 2004). Of course the entry mode choice will depend on the rules and regulation of the host country.

#### **Location specific factors**

Considering that the target market for a higher education provider is quite specific, the location familiarity plays a pertinent role in the choice of a

destination for exporting the higher education or establishing an offshore operation. Hence, the need to understand the concept of market potential and location familiarity.

**Market Potential-** The attractiveness of the foreign market encourages commitment of more resources. Market potential allows an organisation to more quickly offset its high investment costs for going offshore (Czinkota et al., 2009). The host country that offers benefits as low-cost labor, access to unique skills and/or access to untapped markets makes it more attractive for a firm to expand its operation in that host country (Czinkota et al., 2009). Probability of entering a foreign market using an equity-based strategic mode increases based on the attractiveness of the market (Czinkota, 2009).

**Location Familiarity-** This factor explains the relevance of a location or positioning in a foreign market and the positive interest of a firm to establish its operation in that location. Ekledo & Shivakumar (2004) in their study indicate a greater familiarity with the location leads to greater ownership, with less knowledgeable service firms likely to utilise a joint venture. This in the process minimises the risk of investment and operation and reputation of the firm. The location factor is mainly due to the economic differences among different countries.

#### **Internalisation specific factors**

As knowledge-intensive organisations, the service delivered by higher education providers depend highly on its human resources and it is not possible to duplicate this knowledge to an offshore operation. Hence the tactical know-how comes plays a crucial role.

*Tactic Know-how* The knowledge based industries often face difficulties due to the transfer of knowledge, requiring specialised personnel, structures and processes to be transferred as part of their internationalisation (Hill, Hwang & Kim, 1990; Sanchez-Peinado, Pla-Barber & Hebert, 2007). This suggests that the firm rely on internal transfer of human resources rather than relying completely on the local partners – with which difficulties arise on patenting, with the increased risk of appropriation and dissemination.

#### **ROLE OF INTERMEDIARIES**

Based on the analysis of the literature, intermediaries provide a number of important roles which may impact upon the internationalisation process of higher education providers. The following variables explain the importance of their understanding and role in the internationalisation process of higher education providers.



### **Market Knowledge**

The internationalisation process of firms is driven by a firm's experimental knowledge (Blomstermo & Sharma, 2006). A firm's foreign market entry is explained as a process of increasing accumulation of experimental knowledge about business partners, and of committing human, technical and administrative resources. Trade missions can enhance the process of building relationships between potential business partners in different countries over a period of time (Wilkinson & Brouthers, 2000b). The presence of knowledgeable intermediaries is often extremely beneficial for the firms to gain appropriate market knowledge which finally decides on the entry mode to a foreign market. The market knowledge in terms of local rules and regulations are extremely important and an intermediary/education agent may assist to a great extent. Agents are now relied upon not only to help prospective overseas students with the process of being admitted to and attending universities, but also to help identify new markets and predict future trends (see for example, ICEF, 2013; Austrade Bangkok, 2013). With the rapid expansion of higher education, recruitment agents have now become 'embedded in the strategies of international offices' with universities preferring to work with their own 'in-house' agents (Hulme et al., 2013).

### **Strategic Positioning**

One of the most crucial strategic decisions of an international firm is to select an appropriate institutional arrangement for entering and expanding in a foreign market (Root, 1994). The nature of the firm and their product or service is important factor to consider in relation to the strategic positioning of the firm. The strategic decision of the firm in terms of operation in the host country depends on the ownership (O) factor (Dunning & Kundu, 1995; Ekeledo & Sivakumar, 1998; Javalgi, Griffith & White, 2003; Czinkota et al., 2009). The choice of intermediaries can be a deciding factor for operational feasibility in the host market (Andersson, 2002).

### **Network Facilitators**

Intermediaries like Export Promotion Organisation (EPO), wholesalers, contractors, distributors etc. play a major role in facilitating the collaboration between the firm in the home country and the preferable entity in the host country depending on the Entry Mode Choice (EMC). Johnsen & Johnsen (1999) consider business networks as the relationships a firm has with its customers, distributors, suppliers, competitors and government –the actors in a business network. By internationalising the firm creates and maintains relationships with counterparts in other countries. Networks expose Small to Medium size Enterprises (SMEs) to international markets through an accumulation of institutional, business and internationalisation knowledge providing necessary

intelligence in support of the process (Eriksson et al., 2000; Mejri & Katsuhiko, 2010). The network is established via intermediary and there is so less empirical evidence about the nature of intermediaries and their role and involvement and in what form to make the internationalisation process successful (Ghauri et al., 2003; Zeng & Williamson 2003).

### **Competition**

The higher education providers face stiff competition from other higher education providers not only from the same country but also from other countries, which can also be the destination choice for international students. As Knight (2014, p.44) notes in relation to cross-border education, there has been a gradual shift from 'a development cooperation framework to a partnership model and now to a commercial and competitiveness model'.

### **Financial interest of agents**

There is little empirical data as to how the relationship between institution and agent has developed over time, in terms of the current concerns regarding ethical practice and transparency. The contract between higher education provider and agent, and the commission paid are central to the formal relationship (Magyar & Robinson-Pant, 2013). Australia's ESOS Act is a regulatory framework set up in 2000 to protect the interests of international students (and, one assumes the reputation of Australia's higher education industry). Its National Code of Practice for Registration Authorities and Providers of Education and Training to Overseas Students National Code, consisting of four parts, is a legislative tool setting out the obligations of education providers, which includes aspects such as adhering to migration law and supporting what is called 'visa integrity'. Education providers also have to be registered with CRICOS, managed by the education department of the Australian government. Most of the agents will recruit international students in return of a commission percentage which varies from 10% - 25% of the tuition fee. In certain instances, the amount may be more than 25% under special circumstances and particular performance. This financial arrangement plays a significant role in determining which higher education institutions will be marketed by the agent. This forms the basis of the cut throat competition in the market.

### **Reliance and trust factor**

Increasing reliance on agents include: knowledge of local networks (contacts with families and sponsors), offering information and services in local languages and dialects, cultural understanding, ability to go to remote areas, same time zone (Observatory 2014, Hulme et al., 2013 & Raimo et al., 2014).

Agents often play an important 'hand holding' role for such students who have never been to the West and can help mediate different languages and cultural practices (Raimo et al., 2014). In a report commissioned by the British Council in 2002 entitled 'Developing the UK's International Agent Network', the author states that 'agents have only a limited role in raising interest in study abroad but they play a very important role as intermediaries helping to convert interest from students ... into actual placements in institutions abroad' (Krasocki 2002, p.3). The physical presence of the agent, face to face interaction and getting an answer to all the questions builds the trust factor amongst students and their parents. The suggestion and counselling is accepted by large number of students and parents due to this trust factor on the agent. The Observatory report (2014, p.18) lists a huge number of services provided to students by agents: health insurance, travel insurance, visa processing, airport pick-up, language training, accommodation, application guidance, cell phones, currency exchange, school visits, internet, career counselling, referral to institutions, local job placement, programme of study selection, education exhibitions, interviews, promotional materials. Most of these services were provided free of charge, particularly application/admission guidance, programme selection and career counselling.

### **RESEARCH PROBLEM DEFINITION**

The eclectic paradigm focuses on the firm specific factors, location specific factors and the internalisation specific factors. The role of intermediary focuses on factors like market knowledge, local presence and strong networking, reliance and trust of the students and parents and hence the reputation of their operation. It can be said that the market knowledge of an intermediary or education agent is extremely important in terms of flowing the relevant information to the higher education provider so that they could plan their internationalisation process accordingly. This flow of market knowledge to the higher education provider is through the intermediary and aligns with the eclectic paradigm. The strong networking which an intermediary may have assist the higher education provider to gain access to that part of the world and also to gain the reliance of international students and their parents in terms of taking informed decision to enrol at the higher education provider. This networking aspect of the intermediary also relates to the eclectic paradigm. The reliance, trust and the reputation factor of an intermediary is extremely important for maintaining a standard operation. An education agent understands that their reputation and face value brings them more business especially through referral process. Hence, this quality of the intermediary is also aligned to the eclectic paradigm. However, the conceptual background discussed in the previous sections lack the first-hand knowledge about the role of intermediaries in the internationalisation of higher education. It is not very clear which elements or themes of the intermediaries need to be recognised more by the higher

education provider and how that can be nurtured to develop a better working relationship. The below questions form the basis of this study and is explored through the literature review and also through semi structured interviews of international office staff of higher education providers, government office staff responsible for internationalisation process and education agent. The aim is to explore the key themes of the intermediaries and how they could be further used in the internationalisation of higher education.

- What is the role of intermediaries (e.g. education agents) in the internationalisation of higher education?
- What factors of the intermediaries can be considered important while considering the internationalisation process?
- How much can a higher education provider depend on intermediaries like an education agent?

### **METHODOLOGY**

The concept of research onion is used to demonstrate the research process. The proposed study is based on the exploratory study of literature for the internationalisation process of higher education providers.

This study uses qualitative research methods with a deductive research approach. The deductive logic provides an opportunity to explore and reflect upon the current knowledge of the domain (Zikmund et al., 2013). Whilst the role of intermediaries in accessing foreign markets is well described by international business literature (e.g. by Andersson, 2002), this is done in a context dissimilar to that of the higher education sector (e.g. Coryell et al., 2012). Therefore, a qualitative approach was selected, to collect more information on the subject of observation (the role of intermediaries in higher education internationalisation), using semi-structured interviews to extract rich, detailed and in depth information from a carefully selected group of key stakeholders to ensure availability of valid information (Babbie, 2007).

The study is grounded by the previous empirical studies and the theories about entry mode choice and role of network intermediaries are examined. The researchers have conducted face-to-face interviews with International Office Staff from two Australian Universities, one Office Staff from the Victorian Government and one education agent with decades of experience. These informants were selected based on their areas of expertise, domain of influence and depth of experience. Between these professionals, three key stakeholder groups of higher education internationalisation (university decision makers, government regulators and freelance agents) are represented. The respondents together have possessed over 40 years of professional experience. Furthermore, the informants from two universities represent a young (under 50 years) and an old (over 50 years old) institution, to capture a variety of practices.

For the purpose of this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect primary data. The aim in conducting the interviews was primarily to gain some first-hand insights into the relationships between agents, universities and students in order to help interrogate the literature findings from differing perspectives. The interviews were conducted by the researchers in person, under the conditions of the Human Research Ethics requirements legislated in Australia. The interviews – which took 30 to 60 minutes each – were audio recorded and transcribed. The prompting questions of the semi-structured interviews were derived from literature and mapped against the research questions directly.

**Table A** (see Appendix) shows the relationship between the interview questions (I) and the research questions (R). During the interviews, the questions asked provided an in depth knowledge about the experience each interviewee had in dealing with the factors influencing the intermediaries to play their role in the internationalisation of higher education. These responses further strengthens the research questions and validates the role of intermediaries in the internationalisation process. Research question 1 corresponds to the interview questions 4-8. Research question 2 corresponds to the interview questions 6-8 and research question 3 corresponds to the interview questions 3-8.

Answer of the respondents for interview questions 1 and 2 are mainly used to find out the suitability of the interviewee in terms of this paper. It is evident from the responses of the interview questions 4-8 from all the respondents the specific role of intermediary (education agent) in the recruitment of international students. Respondents of the university international office made it very clear that without education agent it is extremely difficult to recruit international students from most parts of the world. Although there are exception where international students would enrol for higher education without assistance from education agent. However, as mentioned in the responses, the complexity of choosing the right course and then applying for student visa compels a student to process their application through an education agent. Responses of the interview questions 6-8 assist to confirm the specific themes of the intermediary, which can guide a higher education provider to gain success in recruiting international students. It also describes the strength an intermediary or education agent may have in certain countries to facilitate the meeting between government officials which otherwise would take a lot of time and may cost considerable time and money. Responses of the interview questions 3-8 states the dependability of a higher education provider on an intermediary or education agent in terms of international student recruitment or establishing an operation in a foreign land. It is clear that the knowledge of the education agent cannot be under mind as it may lead to a disaster result. It is extremely difficult to know the local rules and regulations and to gain the trust

of students in a foreign land. However, an education agent can be relied and trusted because of his local presence and reputation of his work profile.

Thematic analysis was used to evaluate the responses. The responses to the interview questions led to the identification of the key themes, which were then used to reflect on the research questions. The conceptual framework was mapped against the themes identified by the interviewees, to allow the researchers to conclude the contribution of the responses to the current understanding and practices of the roles of education agents in higher education internationalisation.

### **Analysis of the key themes**

While progressively going through the semi-structured interviews the key themes are identified from the response of the interviewees. These key themes are further analysed and discussed to project the importance of them in the internationalisation process of higher education. Each of the key themes are discussed in terms of the references provided by the interviewees from their personal knowledge and professional experiences.

## **ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this section is to present the key findings that reflect the role of intermediaries in the internationalisation of higher education as experienced by the interviewees. It is evident that the agents play an extremely vital role in the internationalisation process and the four key themes that are identified from the interviews are Market Knowledge, Network Facilitators, Financial Interest and Reliance and Trust factor.

### **Market Knowledge**

Market Knowledge defines the in-depth knowledge of the intermediary or education agent about the local market in which they operate. Within this theme, two sub-themes were identified based on the responses: (1) 'Necessary evil' and (2) 'local knowledge'.

The responses of the international officers of universities who were interviewed for this project state that agents are a 'necessary evil' in relation to the internationalisation of higher education. In their interview an international office staff revealed:

*'we need agents because we can't be in every country around the world. We have very limited financial and human resources, so, they are able to be in country, they are able to speak the language, they understand the cultural sensitivities of that particular country that they are working in. So they can do things that we can't possibly do.'*

In this sense, 'necessary evil' is defined as the portfolio of supportive activities (such as sales, recruitment, in market engagement, etc.) which is delivered by the agents to support the internationalisation activity, but falls beyond the capabilities (and possibly outside of the guidelines) of the higher education providers' international practices. Investing in developing these capabilities in a university that is far from the market may also be costly and time consuming. The choice to outsource this market access and knowledge capacity as opposed to integrating it into the staff development activities of the higher education providers also causes tensions within the institution, and the use of external agents requires internal justification.

This justification is facilitated by the unique capabilities the agents provide to the higher education providers to generate profit. In their interview, an education agent said:

*'We often get approached by the university marketing, especially ah market intelligence. As an agent we do have a lot of branches that we have in overseas to give them ideas what sort of demand that the institution ah, for each university that we have numbers of student and for that university always ask ah, you know, how many numbers? How many student that you can get for one year?'*

As stated above, reducing cost to market and improving reach in target countries based upon the localised capabilities of the agents is expected as a service provided. The market knowledge of agent is a major factor which benefits a provider when taking decision to start an offshore operation as part of their internationalisation process. The provider may seek assistance from agent consultants in terms of knowledge of local law and policies. In the interview with an education agent, they stated:

*'From my experience, a lot of universities hire the ah, local consultant to lobbying the government on a getting the policies and rules that they want to make sure that they ah, follow what the government wants them to do. What the idea is as an agent ah they know that their is a market but they also want to make sure that this is a long term decision ah, because ah, the demanding of the, um, for the education offshore and not only that the situation happening in each country, how highly they are regarded, you know, international graduates. Ah, having the international university, ah good quality education ah, available not far from their home. There is a market definitely ah, for international student ah running um, a campus in offshore.'*

From these statements, it can be concluded that the in-depth local knowledge in terms of laws, market conditions, political connections, language and culture, which intermediaries or education agent possess, is needed by higher education international offices. The local knowledge of the agents and the internal rationalisation of the international officers (as 'necessary evil')

provides the parameters in which agents are used and become instrumental in the internationalisation of higher education institutions.

### **Network facilitators**

Network facilitator defines the networking potential of an intermediary in the local market including higher education providers, related governmental departments and other associations. Intermediaries like an agent can often play the role of network facilitator in the internationalisation process. In fact, in some cases, their connections provides necessary aid to the higher education provider to put a project to success. Within this theme, two sub-themes were identified based on the responses: (1) Multiplicity of connectedness and (2) Sales marketing channel capabilities.

As described by the interviewee who is an international office staff:

*'A lot of these people tend to not be solely agents they tend to have other work as well. For example they may be lawyers they may be, you know, part timers maybe doing some other stuff, it's not their bread and butter, but they do it as part of it.'*

He further stated to stress on the sales and marketing channel aspect that:

*'You know this person, this person knows another 100 people and 100 people who know ten thousand people and it's not to say they're not good. You know they may not be the main focus but without them we don't get access to this whole area and in marketing and this is solely the marketing field. A bad channel member or, or a less skilled channel member with good contacts is better than a skilled channel member with no contacts.'*

So, ultimately it comes down to the marketing capability of an agent and have the convincing element embedded in them when providing relevant information to a potential student who wants to study in Australia. It is quite difficult to get to know every higher education provider from offshore and hence the agent plays this intermediary role which affects the market share of a higher education provider.

He further continued to explain the reach of an agent in terms of networking and how they could be of assistance if need be. It clearly reflects on the multiplicity of connectedness in terms of the variety of types and areas of connections an agent can bring to the university. The networking capabilities of an agent put them in a better position when dealing with the higher education providers. The dependency and reliability of the university officer increase when an agent demonstrate their capacity to resolve particular issues or achieve expected outcomes of the higher education provider. This is mostly in context to the local knowledge, law and order, government regulations and rules of the financial institutions:

*'Ok this depends on like I guess again the expertise of the agent, number one where they sit in the hierarchy of agents because we know that*



*there is a hierarchy of agents and some agents and networks and number there, you know how much the university is willing to give to the agent levy to run the operations.'*

*'So if you go to a place like India, it is very easy to get access to, you know, the ministers, the departments, the top universities, the vice chancellors and so on and so forth. So when you say facilitate the network, the agent not only facilitates the sub agent network, so it filters up you know but the agent also facilitates why the wider exchange in terms of staff, in terms of projects in terms of whole other things.'*

According to one interviewee who is an experienced reputed agent, the networking role played by an agent often is necessary to push a project of establishing partnership for a higher education. As reflected in the interview, the role an agent plays to increase the sales and market share in the process of internationalisation is quite significant. It is the strength of an agent to work as an intermediary between the higher education provider and the interested student and their parents. The student relies on the advice that an agent provides not only about the provider but also about life in Australia, career outcome of a course etc. This information is extremely important to understand and the university official must rely in order to get the market share:

*'it's an advantage for us as an agent try to ah, become the ah, middle man, you know, introducing the institution in off shore like Korea ah enter into Australia. The hard work for us is just getting that curriculum syllabus translated in English and there's a lot of ah, back forward ah, between faculty, course co-ordinator, you know ah, changing the email and chasing them to recognise each one another for each subject that they have it's a hard. But it works for us ah, at one time.'*

It can be concluded that the market knowledge of education agents assist them to be better in marketing and proving their sales capability. It also shows the multi-level connectedness that an education agent can have which could be useful as a bargaining power when negotiating financial arrangements with the higher education providers.

### **Financial Interest of the agents**

Financial interest of agent defines the relation of the monetary involvement of an education agent in recruiting international students for a higher education provider. Agents refer students to a provider and in return expects the referral commission percentage as agreed through a formal agent agreement process. Sometimes, this agreement can be verbal during a

probationary phase but in most cases there is a signed formal arrangement. In Australia, according to ESOS act, Institutions need to have an agreed formal agent agreement detailing the role of the agent, their responsibility of working in an ethical manner and an agreed commission structure (Australian Government, Department of Education, 2014). Sometimes, based on performance, an additional performance bonus or alike may be provided to the deserving agent. Agents often refer students to providers who pay a good commission percentage and on time. Within this theme, two sub-themes were identified based on the responses: (1) Return/ Profit and (2) Motivation.

Working as an intermediary to recruit international students for a higher education provider is considered to be a bread earning business for many agents. Hence, as part of any business, they measure the profit margin when promoting a higher education provider. Most of the providers will have similar faculties and streams in which a potential student would like to apply for. In this scenario, the commission structure which determines the profit margin do play a major role.

For example in the interview an international office staff said:

*'From our perspective we have to pay quite a high commissions to these agents for the students to be able to study at the institution. It would depend on the agreement that they have, but agents do like to take a piece of the pie where ever they possibly can and they might be able to assist with things, if you take India for example or even China where students are going to need to utilise an agent for visa processing.'*

According to the interviewee who is an international office staff, although an agent would try to understand the need of a student and provide counselling as per the need, still the financial interest plays an extremely important role in referring the student to a provider. In his words:

*'From the agent perspective, I guess working as an agent first of all, the main thing is where can I place the student, so what the student interested in, if we have clients and we have students, then we try not to give them to other agents. That's very important. So you grab them, then you say you counsel them, you do all sorts of things, you, you decide ok what's a good fit for the student and the agents who simply send you the, person who pays the highest of commission and there are also what they call a better agent.'*

Apart from the profit margin, the intention of a student to study abroad and the dream of their parents work as a motivational factor for the agent. Providing accurate information and offering assistance to one satisfied client will bring next ten clients – this concept is extremely clear to an agent and they consider it, as a motivational factor for them.

It can be concluded that the profit or return on investment of an education agent cannot be undermined. This plays an essential role in deciding the partner

with whom the education agent will continue to work and refer international students. The market knowledge and the connectedness boost the confidence of the education agent to decide on the reliability of profit and choosing the higher education provider to refer students.

### **Reliance and Trust factor**

Reliance and trust factor defines the image of an education agent in terms of his work profile. The education agent is expected to provide counselling to a student to study at a foreign university and guide the student through the enrolment process. Within this theme, three sub-themes were identified based on the responses (1) Relationship, (2) Time and (3) Rules/ Knowledge relating to paperwork, university and qualification system:

The relationship between a student and an agent carries a strong bond. This forms the basis of a reliance factor and in most of the cases the student rely on the suggestions and guidance from an agent. In fact, a student expects this guidance as part of their trust on the agent. This is further stated by international office staff in the interview:

*'They may often come to Australia to do high school, secondary high school education, now the agent sort of acts as a family for that particular student. They might organise karaoke sessions, or you know family games days', things like that, information bingo nights you name it, but they are trying to make sure they control that student. So even though a student is physically studying at (University X) in a bachelor degree, we can't make them apply directly to a post grad. They most likely, they will go back and use that same agent because they feel comfortable, the parents feel comfortable, those sort of things.'*

The reliance on agents for information in terms of taking admission sitting in a foreign land is too high for certain countries, especially like Asian countries, some parts of sub-continent etc. Amongst various reasons one of the major one is the complexity of the system of choosing the right subject or stream, assessing whether the course is suitable for the goal of the student or not and then going through and completing the admission process. Last but not the least, the requirement and complex procedure of applying for student visa which can be daunting to many students offshore. This validates further the sub-theme of Rules and Knowledge, when it comes to the complex visa regulatory procedure and university enrolment process. This is demonstrated in the interview of international office staff:

*'Most universities if you can apply yourself they would still channel you to an agent simply because of handling of documents and visas and so on and forth, which the agents can do much better, yeah because of certain reasons that they cannot speak on their websites the*

*preparation of documents, but the agents brand and the agent's reputation really come fourth if it's for special niche courses, example if you want to get into a medical degree some agents do have coaching, yeah, for example if you are very borderline in your application your history your documentation and so on and so forth, that one the agents knowledge can help you get across the line, in your assessment.'*

He further explained:

*'Ok, students will have a general idea, of what they are interested in, but to most students especially under graduates, the university system in any country not just for, even more for foreign countries, is a great mystery. It's a very closed system even though there is a lot of information on the internet, it's very, very, confusing for a lot of people even the lecturers. And there's different standard and there is no standardised way of doing and also the idea of that an education leads to certain careers, certain jobs, that's not very clear. So what the agent does is they actually play a counselling role, for a lot of students, they may have some idea of somebody wanting to study in business for example, but what in business. There could be so many fields, so many majors and are depending on the agent and their preference, they would suggest certain fields and not suggest others.'*

Another international office staff clarifies the same findings about reliance on agents in her interview saying:

*'Yep, yep, yep because they are a very important network. They really are one of the major influences of a student's decision to want to study in Australia and where they study.... Because they sit down and they've got mum and dad or just the student, or mum dad and the student.... And mum and dad are looking at them for advice..... So they're going to need some words of wisdom, as to why my son, you know, the University of Sydney and why can't they go to the University of Sydney or why, so this particular agent is extremely important in the decision making process.'*

The brand name of an agent plays a vital role in terms of reliance factor by students and their parents. Their experience in counselling is a major factor to guide a student for a suitable course. The time an agent provides to a potential student sometimes becomes a deciding factor of using their service. If the agent does not provide the expected caring and time to discuss and suggest the higher education provider and the course which best suit the student, the agent may lose the student and that affects their market name.

As per the interview of international office staff:

*'That has good branding, good market share and why, because they are very established, in fact they are more established than most*

*universities. Yeah, and they are very knowledgeable about a lot of products. They don't just represent one University they represent... Maybe all of the universities and they have teams which specialise in different areas of different universities of different state.'*

It can be concluded that the complexity of paperwork in terms of student visa lodgement preparation is an area which is quite complex to many international students. That is a major reason that they wish to avail the service of an education agent. In addition, they can meet the education agent in person whenever they have any doubt in their mind during this process of applying for a student visa to study in Australia. It is not possible to meet or speak to the University representatives at all times. The university rules and system can often be quite complex to understand and follow from another part of the world. Hence the dependency factor on agent increases. This relates back to the overall knowledge of the education agent, rapport with the higher education provider and any other related stakeholder and also the admin charges which an education agent may charge. Hence, all the above mentioned factors of market knowledge, network facilitators, financial interest and the reliance factor are all inter-related and form the basis of effectiveness of the role of education agent in the internationalisation of higher education.

### **EVALUATION OF THEMES**

Table B (see Appendix) shows the relationship between the interview questions (I) and the themes (T). The importance of the response from the interviewee clearly indicate the themes that are important factors of an intermediary in it's role in the internationalisation process. These themes form the basis of the education agent (intermediary) and their relation with higher education providers, students and their guardian. Interview questions 5-7 direct towards theme 1. Interview questions 3-5 and 8 direct towards theme 2. Interview questions 4 and 5 direct towards theme 3. Interview questions 6 and 7 direct towards theme 4.

Responses of the interviewees for interview questions 5-7 clearly indicates the importance of the market knowledge where an intermediary or education agent operate. This theme (market knowledge) serves as one of the key factors for which a higher education provider depends on the education agent for recruiting international students. Higher education provider do not have resources to gain equal amount of market knowledge as an intermediary or education agent for internationalisation. This is evident from the responses of the international office staff of the universities. Responses of the interview questions 3-5 and 8 states the role of an intermediary or education agent as a network facilitator. It is quite useful for a higher education provider to use the strong network support that an education agent may have in a foreign land. This networking factor of an education agent can be used in favour of the

internationalisation process of the higher education provider, not to mention the objective of setting up an operation in a foreign land. Responses of the interview questions 4 and 5 reveals the importance of the financial reward that an education agent receives by recruiting an international student for a higher education provider. In a materialistic world, this factor seems to drive the work flow of an agent to promote a certain higher education provider over another. This also led to a strong competition amongst the higher education provider trying to recruit students from the same foreign country. Responses from interview questions 6 and 7 reveals the face value of an education agent as the face value depends on the reliance and trust of the agent in the mind of a student or his parents. It is evident from the responses of the interviewees that an education agent often hand held a student from choosing the right course at a higher education provider to complete the enrolment procedure and assisting in obtaining the student visa. The trust factor of an agent assist a parent to follow instruction of the agent in terms of financial payments in enrolling their child at a foreign institution. It is clear from the interviewee responses that the trust and reliance factor of an agent can make or break them. If an agent continues to provide reliable service to the students, referral business will assist him to perform better. However, if the agent do not perform the task as expected or misguide a student, he will lose the credibility and face value. In that case, it is quite difficult to gain back the trust of the students and also the higher education providers.

Hence, responses to the interview questions further emphasises the four themes.

Table C (see Appendix) shows the relationship between the research questions (R) and the themes (T).

### **Research question 1**

Research question 1 asks about the role of intermediaries in the internationalisation of higher education. The respondents answered this question highlighting themes 1 (market knowledge), 2 (network facilitation) and 4 (reliance and trust factor). They pointed out that the knowledge about the local market of an education agent serves as one of the key factors by which they can recruit international students. They are well aware of the courses that will have a better market than others. They are well aware about the intention of students and their aim of studying higher education with a foreign university. By means of their asymmetrical information to the potential customers, and serving as an external input to the university, agents are viewed as the 'necessary evil' by international offices, who allow developing a competitive edge over others in the market.

Respondents also pointed out about the networking capacity of the agents which facilitate them to overcome certain situations due to their networking influence on relevant bodies, associations and even government departments.

Finally, the respondents stressed on the face value and reliance factor of the agent. The student and parents believe an agent because of their knowledge, local presence and also due to the support service that they provide to a student. Getting admission for higher education at a foreign university by choosing the correct stream and subjects, applying for student visa and arranging all the other facilities like accommodation, telecom service, banking service etc. can be quite complicated. This is where the education agent extends his valued service and in many cases do not charge or may charge a minimum processing fee.

### **Research question 2**

Research question 2 asks about the important factors of an intermediary that can be considered in the internationalisation process. According to the responses from the interviewees, all the themes can be considered as valuable factors that an intermediary or agent should have. In addition to the responses mentioned above for research question 1, theme 3 (financial interest) seems to be a deciding factor for an intermediary to recruit international students for a higher education provider. As evident from the response of the interviewee who is an education agent having decades of experience, commission payable plays a crucial role in determining which higher education provider will get promoted in a foreign market. This further bring strong competition and each higher education provider try to retain the confidence of good education agents by providing them agreed commission and additional performance bonuses within the ethical standards.

### **Research question 3**

Research question 3 asks for the dependence of higher education providers on education agent. Responses from the interviewees relates to themes 1 (Market Knowledge), 2 (Network Facilitation) and 3 (Financial Interest). The more market knowledge that an intermediary has, it becomes easy for him to recruit international students. Response from interviewees suggest that it is quite impossible for a higher education provider to have local market knowledge from different parts of the world. They cannot afford to have such resources and it is not at all cost effective. Hence the dependence on intermediary like education agent. If a higher education provider plans to enter a foreign market, the networking opportunity that an intermediary may provide can be quite useful. Sometimes the process becomes faster due to the assistance from the networking facilitated by the intermediary. The dependencies of the higher education provider on an intermediary to recruit international students happens in exchange of an agreed commission structure. The effectiveness of managing

this commission payment plays a crucial role in getting the market share in a highly competitive environment.

The above relationship can be drawn back to the literature review, especially Czinkota et al.'s (2009) and the eclectic paradigm. The themes derived from the responses of the respondents are important and provides primary data information to understand the role of intermediaries in the internationalisation of higher education. The reliance on these themes by the higher education providers is an important context on the success of their international operation. This is missing in the literature and more work is required to understand the relationship of the derived themes as factors determining role of intermediaries and how it connects the student, parents and the higher education providers.

### CONCLUSION

This paper looks at the role of education agent as an intermediary in the internationalisation of higher education. Critical investigation into the role of education agents in shaping student expectations is important for generating insights into the ways that Higher Education is being transformed due to commercialisation and the implications for enhancing student experience, admissions processes and internationalisation strategies (Magyar & Robinson-Pant, 2013). The research questions get answered by the collection of primary data from the interviews. The respondents stressed on the themes like market knowledge, network facilitators, financial interest of agents and reliance & trust factor. These themes serve as deciding factors for an intermediary to play a vital role in the internationalisation of higher education.

In particular, market knowledge was proven to be important as something universities do not actually have and view as undesirable ('necessary evil'), and is very particular to the local circumstances of the market targeted. Agents are viewed as network facilitators. Their networks are reliant on multiple connections, and therefore facilitate a very robust sales channel. They have all those connections and contacts in the market, the university does not, and are able to 'lend' them to the university, so the university can treat it as one monolithic sales channel. In return, agents get a share of the financial gain of the university, and are in a position to distribute this gain across their channels and stakeholders. The value created by the activity of the agents facilitating the transaction (student gaining an international qualification) is both material and intangible. Intangible gains are utilised by the agent as developing credibility and growing their networks further. The agents capitalise on this trust to be able to facilitate the transactions they are tasked with, on behalf of the universities. Combined with their unique position from the perspective of the students (and their parents), agents give advice and put their professional skills and knowledge of education systems and degree topics to work, to ensure the student acquires the best possible outcome, while they the highest combined reward (both in



tangible and intangible terms). These themes provide pathway to all party involved in this process to know more about the need to each other and to improve the working relationship.

### **Theoretical implications**

This paper has introduced several key concepts/themes that could be used to frame future investigations into the role of education agents in the internationalisation of higher education. The eclectic paradigm focused on the firm specific factors, location specific factors and internalisation factors. Firm specific ownership factors are particularly applicable in the internationalisation process with the pressurised environment and competition facing the higher education providers. It emphasizes on the access to financial resources to continue the operational aspect of the providers. Considering that the target market for a higher education provider is quite specific, the location familiarity plays a pertinent role in the choice of a destination for exporting the higher education or establishing an offshore operation. Hence, the need to understand the concept of market potential and location familiarity. As knowledge-intensive organisations, the service delivered by higher education providers depend highly on their human resources and it is not possible to duplicate this knowledge to an offshore operation. Hence the tactical know-how comes plays a crucial role. The themes focus on the market knowledge, network facilitators, strategic positioning, competition, financial interest of agents and reliance and trust factor. This market knowledge of an intermediary or education agent is extremely important in terms of flowing the relevant information to the higher education provider so that they could plan their internationalisation process accordingly. This flow of market knowledge to the higher education provider is through the intermediary and aligns with the eclectic paradigm. The strong networking which an intermediary may have assist the higher education provider to gain access to that part of the world and also to gain the reliance of international students and their parents in terms of taking informed decision to enrol at the higher education provider. This networking aspect of the intermediary also relates to the eclectic paradigm. The reliance, trust and the reputation factor of an intermediary is extremely important for maintaining a standard operation. An education agent understands that their reputation and face value brings them more business especially through referral process. Hence, this quality of the intermediary is also aligned to the eclectic paradigm.

### **Practical implications for higher education providers**

The higher education providers should not neglect the importance of the knowledge that the education agent may offer for recruiting international students or even to establish an offshore operation. Rather, they should be using the education agent for their benefit to excel in the process of

internationalisation. Higher education providers must concentrate on the benefits of proper and intensive training session to the education agents about their products and encourage to maintain the ethical standards when counselling potential students. Higher education providers must try to use the networking advantage that an education agent may have in order to compete in the international market. As revealed from the responses of the interviewees *“an education agent is a necessary evil”*. Hence, it is better to understand their potential and try to work with them and make them feel a valued partner. That way it will be easy to gain the trust of the agent, which will finally result to a higher degree to valued partnership.

#### **Practical implications for intermediaries/education agents**

The education agents must understand that once they represent a higher education provider they are in essence the face of that provider. They need to be aware of the courses, facilities, student services and the potential for the courses. They should try to counsel to the best of their knowledge and ethically. Due to the enormous amount of trust that a student or their parents may have on an agent, providing ethical guidance should be a moral responsibility of an agent. If an agent gives misleading information, the chain of trust will break and it will be extremely difficult to repair. In the process, the higher education provider will suffer from recruitment of international students and the agent will suffer from financial loss. The education agent can always guide the international office staff in marketing and business development based on their knowledge about the market and which strategy should be most effective. That will be a true method to perform the role of intermediary in the internationalisation of higher education.

#### **LIMITATION AND FURTHER RESEARCH**

For this paper only four interviews could be conducted comprising of two university international office staff, one government office manager and one education agents having decades of experience. It is clear that more interviews need to be conducted in terms of expectations from international office staff and also from various experienced education agents until a saturation level with the research questions are reached. This would bring out more themes that could impact the role of education agent as an intermediary in the internationalisation of higher education.

**APPENDIX**

**Table A: Relationship between the Research Questions and the Interview Questions**

	<p><b>(I1)</b> Tell me about your higher education international experience?</p> <p><b>(I2)</b> Please describe your involvement in a situation/ project where a higher education institution was making a foreign market entry choice?</p> <p><b>(I3)</b> In your opinion what were the most important factors influencing this choice?</p> <p><b>(I4)</b> What intermediaries were involved in this process?</p> <p><b>(I5)</b> How did education agent influence the entry mode choice decision?</p> <p><b>(I6)</b> Explain your experience about the knowledge of the education agent in terms of international experience, face value and reputation?</p> <p><b>(I7)</b> Please describe your experience with the education agent in terms of their expertise about market potential or location at the host country?</p> <p><b>(I8)</b> Please explain how do you think that the education agent contributed as a network facilitator in the internationalization of higher education?</p>							
	<b>I1</b>	<b>I2</b>	<b>I3</b>	<b>I4</b>	<b>I5</b>	<b>I6</b>	<b>I7</b>	<b>I8</b>
<b>(R1)</b> What is the role of intermediaries (e.g education agents) in the internationalisation of higher education?				√	√	√	√	√
<b>(R2)</b> What factors of the intermediaries can be considered important while considering the internationalisation process?						√	√	√
<b>(R3)</b> How much can a higher education provider depend on intermediaries like an education agent?			√	√	√	√	√	√

I1- I8 – Interview questions

R1 – R3 – Research questions

(Source: own study)

**Table B: Relationship between the Interview Questions and the Themes**

	<p><b>(I1)</b> Tell me about your higher education international experience?</p> <p><b>(I2)</b> Please describe your involvement in a situation/ project where a higher education institution was making a foreign market entry choice?</p> <p><b>(I3)</b> In your opinion what were the most important factors influencing this choice?</p> <p><b>(I4)</b> What intermediaries were involved in this process?</p> <p><b>(I5)</b> How did education agent influence the entry mode choice decision?</p> <p><b>(I6)</b> Explain your experience about the knowledge of the education agent in terms of international experience, face value and reputation?</p> <p><b>(I7)</b> Please describe your experience with the education agent in terms of their expertise about market potential or location at the host country?</p> <p><b>(I8)</b> Please explain how do you think that the education agent contributed as a network facilitator in the internationalization of higher education?</p>							
	<b>I1</b>	<b>I2</b>	<b>I3</b>	<b>I4</b>	<b>I5</b>	<b>I6</b>	<b>I7</b>	<b>I8</b>
<b>(T1)</b> Market knowledge					√	√	√	
<b>(T2)</b> Network facilitators			√	√	√			√
<b>(T3)</b> Financial interest of the agents				√	√			
<b>(T4)</b> Reliance and trust factor						√	√	

I1 – I8 – Interview questions

T1 – T4 – Themes

(Source: own study)

**Table C: Relationship between the Research questions and the Themes**

	<b>(T1)</b> Market knowledge	<b>(T2)</b> Network facilitators	<b>(T3)</b> Financial interest of the agents	<b>(T4)</b> Reliance and trust factor
<b>(R1)</b> What is the role of intermediaries (e.g education agents) in the internationalisation of higher education?	√	√		√
<b>(R2)</b> What factors of the intermediaries can be considered important while considering the internationalisation process?	√	√	√	√
<b>(R3)</b> How much can a higher education provider depend on intermediaries like an education agent?	√	√	√	

T1 – T4 – Themes

R1 – R3 – Research questions

(Source: own study)

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