

LANDMARK 'INTERNATIONAL CODE OF ETHICS' FOR EDUCATION AGENTS

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A group of countries that are some of the most popular destinations for international students are acting to improve the integrity of education recruitment agents.

The move aims to ensure that students receive a better service when they use agents to help them apply for school, college or university places overseas.

Education officials from the UK, Australia, Ireland and New Zealand have issued a joint statement of principles for ethical international student recruitment, following talks in London in March 2012 hosted by the British Council.

The "London Statement" stresses the need for professionalism and ethical responsibility on the part of the commission-based agents who help many schools, colleges and universities to recruit international students.

In some countries' education systems the use of recruitment agents is almost universal.

A small number of agents and consultants have been accused of unethical or even illegal conduct, causing problems both for students and institutions and damaging the reputation of their profession.

The London Statement sets out seven principles that agents will be urged to adhere to, in an effort to ensure they practise responsible business ethics, providing current, accurate and honest information to prospective students so they can make informed choices.

It says that agents' business dealings should be made transparent through written agreements, and they should work with destination countries and higher education providers to help raise ethical standards and best practice.

Underpinning these principles is an ethical framework that also lays great stress on professionalism, integrity, objectivity, transparency and confidentiality.

The countries that are participating will each work towards implementing the principles with the agents that they use and share information about their efforts at another international forum in 2013. In terms of how the countries will implement the principles, this will be decided by each country but is likely to be incorporated into training and communications with agents.

The aim is to restore confidence in agents, who can be individuals, companies or other organisations, known by various titles such as student advisor, education consultant or representative.

Pat Killingley, the British Council's Director of Higher Education said the issuing of the statement of principles was not about getting tough with bad agents but about promoting and encouraging the very good practices that many already follow.

She said: "Our schools, colleges and universities have got some very good agents out there. This is about supporting the vast majority of responsible agents and setting out clearly what our expectations are, to help ensure that international students receive a good service and sound advice when they consult an agent."

The British Council and Australia Education International first initiated discussions two years ago, bringing together representatives from UK, Australia, New Zealand, Ireland. One of the outputs of the roundtable is the statement of principles between UK, Australia, New Zealand and Ireland. The roundtable has also helped the six countries to share advice and best-practice on student welfare and recruitment.

Colin Walters, Chief Executive Officer, Australian Education International, said "it is important that the reputation and integrity of international education continues to be held in high regard. We must ensure that international students receive advice which will enable them to have high quality educational experiences".

Ms Killingley said: "This is a good example of international collaboration in action. The British Council is well placed to help broker agreements of this kind due to our global scale, contacts and experience – and this has been a truly collaborative process between the UK, Australia, New Zealand and Ireland. This work has brought about a landmark joint statement between four countries which should help international students get sound advice and information as they decide where to study."

The next step will be to talk to the agents' representative bodies in countries that send many students to study overseas such as India and China, to get them to sign up to the statement, she added.

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development there are more than three million students being educated at university level outside of their home country. Some commentators expect this to reach eight million by 2025. There are many millions more who study English language courses in the five countries involved in the London Statement.

A copy of the Principles is attached.

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Notes to editors:

The countries first met for talks in 2010, when Australia proposed developing a joint international code of ethics, amongst other initiatives. The London Statement, agreed on 16 March, is the fruit of that.

**Statement of Principles for the Ethical Recruitment of International Students by
Education Agents and Consultants
(To be known as the London Statement)**

March 2012

1. Introduction

1.1 Context

Increasing numbers of students now move across national borders seeking education and training opportunities in order to gain internationally recognised qualifications. The OECD publication Education at a Glance 2010 sources OECD and UNESCO Institute for Statistics, which estimated that more than three million tertiary students were educated outside their home country in 2008. Some commentators project that global demand for international education could be expected to rise to almost eight million by 2025.

The growth in the number of international students has been accompanied by an increase in the number of education agents and consultants who provide services to them. Education agents and consultants are integral and important stakeholders in international education.

1.2 Background to the Initiative

The Roundtable on the Integrity of International Education is a forum at which the UK, Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand and the US meet to share knowledge and experience and identify common areas of practice and concern, as well as scope for collaboration. At the initial meeting of the Roundtable in 2010 Australia proposed developing a joint international code of ethics for international education agents which would facilitate a common approach and raise ethical standards.

The development of a 'Statement of Principles for the Ethical Recruitment of International Students by Education Agents and Consultants' is the initiative that flowed from that proposal. The UK, Australia, Ireland and New Zealand agreed to the statement of principles on 16 March.

Each of these countries is now working towards implementing the principles. This includes training and communications for Agents.

1.3 Purpose

This high-level Statement of Principles promotes best practice among the education agents and consultant professions that support international students. The Statement of Principles is a unifying set of understandings for the recruitment of, and related services provided to, students in international education which serve to promote best practice among education agents and consultants. The Statement will be reflected in each country's approach to international education.

A report on activity will be presented to the Roundtable meeting in 2013.

A number of factors which could be addressed under each principle when developing initiatives and actions are provided in the Attachment on page 3.

2. Ethical Framework

The Statement of Principles is based on an underlying ethical framework of:

- **Integrity** - being straightforward and honest in all professional and business dealings;
- **Objectivity** - not allowing professional judgment to be compromised by bias or conflict of interest;
- **Professional competence and due care** - maintaining professional knowledge and professional service, and acting diligently;
- **Transparency** - declaring conflicts of interest to all clients, especially when service fees are charged to both the education provider and the prospective student;
- **Confidentiality** - respecting and preserving the confidentiality of personal information acquired and not releasing such information to third parties without proper authority;
- **Professional behaviour** – acting in accordance with relevant laws and regulations and dealing with clients competently, diligently and fairly; and
- **Professionalism and purpose** - acting in a manner that will serve the interests of clients and the wider society even at the expense of self-interest; recognising that dedication to these principles is the means by which the profession can earn the trust and confidence of stakeholder groups (individual clients, the public, business and government).

3. Principles

- Principle 1 - Agents and consultants practice responsible business ethics.
- Principle 2 - Agents and consultants provide current, accurate and honest information in an ethical manner.
- Principle 3 - Agents and consultants develop transparent business relationships with students and providers through the use of written agreements.
- Principle 4 - Agents and consultants protect the interests of minors.
- Principle 5 - Agents and consultants provide current and up-to-date information that enables international students to make informed choices when selecting which agent or consultant to employ.
- Principle 6 - Agents and consultants act professionally.
- Principle 7 - Agents and consultants work with destination countries and providers to raise ethical standards and best practice.

Attachment to the London Statement

March 2012

This Attachment to the London Statement of Principles provides suggestions on a number of factors that could be addressed under each of the principles.

Principle 1: Agents and consultants practise responsible business ethics

- Avoiding conflicts of interest
- Observing appropriate levels of confidentiality and transparency
- Acting professionally, honestly and responsibly
- Refraining from being party to any attempt by students or others to engage in fraudulent visa applications
- Acting in the best interests of the student at all times
- Declaring conflicts of interest
- Being transparent in fees to be paid by students and commissions paid by providers
- Providing clear avenues for handling complaints and resolving disputes
- Complying with relevant laws and regulations.

Principle 2: Agents and consultants provide current, accurate and honest information in an ethical manner

- Providing realistic and appropriate information that is tailored to the individual student's circumstances, particularly in relation to language skills, capacity to pay and level of study
- Specifying the rights and responsibilities of the student in the country of destination
- Refraining from claiming a direct government endorsement or privileged relationship with a public official or member of the government where one does not exist; including for example the misuse of national brand logos
- Providing a registration number or other identifier on advertising material
- Using institutions' officially approved material in promoting providers with whom agents have an agreement.

Principle 3: Agents and consultants develop transparent business relationships with students and providers through the use of written agreements

- Signed by the student and the agent
- Signed by the provider and the agent
- Include information on the arrangements put in place by agents and consultants on behalf of the student, such as itemised payment schedules of fees and services, and refund and transfer policies
- Provide details on information provided under Principles 1 and 2, as a means of guiding agents and consultants to give appropriate information to students so that both students and agents understand what has been agreed to
- Maintain student confidentiality
- Are archived in an appropriate manner so that the agreements can be made available to the student or an appropriate authority within a reasonable timeframe.

Principle 4: Agents and consultants protect the interests of minors

- Ensuring that the prospective student has adequate representation and support from a guardian and/or legal counsel during meetings with the agent or consultant and that this is recorded as informed consent before any money changes hands
- Ensuring that the client has the legal capacity to enter into any commitment

- Acting not only in accordance with relevant laws and regulations, but competently, diligently and fairly as befits dealings with minors.

Principle 5: Agents and consultants provide current and up-to-date information that enables international students to make informed choices when selecting which agent or consultant to employ

- Providing information to students about the accreditations the agents have met, the training they have undertaken, the memberships they hold to professional associations or processes undertaken to become registered and accredited education agents and consultants
- Providing information about themselves that support comparison of registration, qualifications and experience.

Principle 6: Agents and consultants act professionally

- Participating in training courses and professional development wherever possible
- Becoming members of professional associations and networks that promote and support best practice in the recruitment of international students.

Principle 7: Agents and consultants work with destination countries and providers to raise ethical standards and best practice

- Sharing information on best practice in the recruitment of international students by education agents and consultants.