



Education agents – protecting Australian standards

Australia is recognised as a premier education provider in the international market. Every year, thousands of students from around the world travel to Australia to study or join online courses.

The Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA) is the national regulator for Australia's vocational education and training (VET) sector. As well as ensuring that education meets nationally approved standards, we aim to support and protect the sector by identifying risks and opportunities associated with international study.

Training providers may use education agents to recruit international students. It is important that the practices used by education agents do not negatively affect the experiences of students or the perceptions of quality of Australian VET courses.

Following concerns about education agent practices, ASQA prioritised international student delivery as a key area for action in 2021–22. We engaged EY Sweeney in December 2021 and January 2022 to study provider management of education agents. We wanted to better understand the experiences and challenges for training providers working with agents, and to identify ways to provide support.

The research highlights good practice in Australia, and also identifies key areas of risk.

Together, this information can help providers and ASQA to develop appropriate supports and improvements to protect students and maintain quality standards for Australian education and training.



Survey sent to
700+
providers



175
providers
responded



Find out
what they
said >>

Standards compliance

The National Code of Practice for Providers of Education and Training to Overseas Students 2018 sets nationally consistent Standards to help providers deliver quality education and training to overseas students. **Standard 2** (Recruitment of an overseas student) and **Standard 4** (Education agents) deal particularly with the roles and responsibilities of providers in managing education agents.

Providers understand and have confidence in how to meet their obligations under Standards 2 and 4; however, there is an opportunity for ASQA to help providers to improve their knowledge and practice.



Current practices

Training providers value high-quality education agent practices, and they generally have good oversight of their education agents and their recruitment activities.

It is important that formal requirements and oversight are established at the outset of a relationship with an agent and continue throughout ongoing projects and activities.

Hiring

Providers aim to choose agents that both perform effectively and have high levels of ethical practice and adherence to the Australian International Education and Training Agent Code of Ethics; 99% assess education agents' activities and practices to ensure that they act ethically, honestly, and in the best interest of international students. However, more could be done to create and uphold key criteria for selection, as well as to share information about agents among providers.

Providers want to choose ethical agents, but could do more to screen them

How they look for agents



89%
direct application from agent

74%
previous experiences with agent

57%
recommendations from other providers

What they look for in agents



78%
ethical approach

65%
familiarity with the Australian system

59%
reputation

How they ensure agents know the Code of Ethics



Top 3 methods:

17%
assess with interview or surveys

16% only use qualified or certified agents

16%
use training

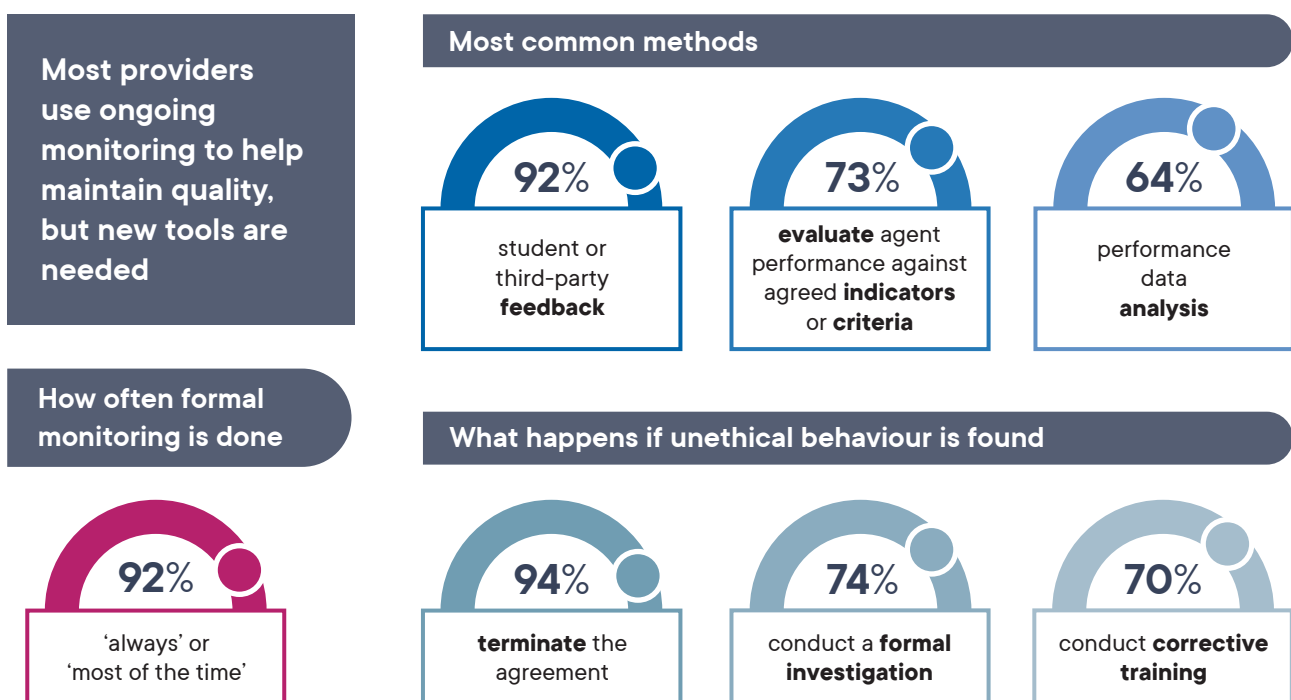
Outset

At the outset of the relationship, providers use key structures to support compliance with the Standards and oversight, including written agreements, record keeping and training.



Ongoing monitoring

Providers use various mechanisms and sources to monitor education agents' activities and practices. However, these mechanisms do not provide a complete picture of agent behaviour.



Potential concerns

While training providers recognise the valuable role that education agents play in recruiting international students, they also acknowledge concerns. Providers have some concerns and experiences with false, misleading or unethical education agent recruitment practices, and may not report these concerns to ASQA.



Opportunities

The results of this research highlight areas of potential focus to improve education agent practice. Providers want more:

- **engagement from ASQA**, and other regulatory bodies, on what constitutes 'demonstrated compliance' against standards and codes
- **ongoing and open communication** with ASQA, and other relevant regulatory bodies, on education agents and international student recruitment
- **insights or reporting** on education agent behaviour.

Providers' suggestions for support from ASQA:

- **general types of education and engagement activities** – more than 29 providers mentioned that webinars would be a useful tool
- **specific education or engagement to improve compliance with the Standards** – providers suggested case studies as well as details of *how* compliance is determined
- **agent education and training** – providers suggested sharing training and information directly with education agents
- **regulation of education agents** – there were numerous suggestions that education agents should be regulated; however, this is outside ASQA's jurisdiction.

New tools and information can help to support providers



Webinars



Case studies



Information sharing

Next steps

ASQA is developing guidance and educational material based on the results of this survey to support provider self-assurance, and quality training and outcomes for students.