

## The Americans are coming

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*The next big shake-up of the global higher education business.*

*ALTHOUGH the United States takes a bigger share of the international student market than any other country, with 22% of the total, it underperforms in relation to its size. Just 3.5% of students on its campuses are from abroad.*



What explains this? Certainly not the quality of education on offer, which is often superb. One huge factor is the way that American universities shun the intermediaries whose services are used by most students wanting to study abroad. Markus Badde, the chief executive of ICEF, a student recruitment consultancy, says two-thirds of the world's border-crossing students, and almost all of those from Asia, turn to "agents" to find a university place. But hardly any important American institution will pay intermediaries.

"There is a real hostility in this country to the use of agents," says Mitch Leventhal, vice-provost for international affairs at the University of Cincinnati. "Some universities think it is illegal—it's not, what's illegal is recruiting American students via agents. Some think it's unethical—but it's only unethical when done unethically. We know that many students, perhaps half of all undergraduate Chinese students, for example, have paid advisers at home to help them. We have no idea what that help consists of."

Mr Leventhal hopes such attitudes will alter. He is the founding president of the American International Recruitment Council, a new non-profit organisation formed by a group of educational institutions. To join the network, recruitment agents will have to accept a code of practice and get regular training. The organisation hopes American universities will be sufficiently convinced of the quality and ethical standards of member agencies that they will agree to work with them. Already 35 universities have joined; the figure should reach 100 soon. The council is working on a trial basis in Bangkok and hopes to process "large numbers" of agents by the end of 2010.

If that happens, the market in international students will be transformed. A survey carried out by i-graduate, a market-research firm, found that although few agents recommended American institutions to their clients, most wanted to. "Agents said the United Kingdom was the country in which they placed the most students," according to Will Archer, the firm's director. "But they said the country in which they would most like to place students was the United States." Those agents rated America as most desirable for undergraduate, postgraduate and MBA courses, leaving Britain in the lead only for language and foundation courses, and Australia only for vocational ones.

Mr Leventhal insists that there are lots of students to go round. But he concedes that academics in other countries are not thrilled by the American plans. "Their hair is on fire," he says. "They're saying, 'Oh my God, the Americans have finally figured it out, they're going to kill us.'"

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