



International Student Recruitment During the Pandemic: The Unique Perspective of Recruiters from Small to Medium-Sized Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract

Higher education can be considered an industry comprised of mobile students attending institutions worldwide (Findlay et al. in *Int Migr* 55(3):139–155, 2017). The global pandemic, COVID-19, has significantly impacted the mobility of these students. Higher education institutions (HEIs) have attracted students using international student recruiters, various marketing materials, websites, and educational agents (de Wit in *Int High Educ* 59:13–14, 2015). When COVID-19 began to unfold around the globe the disease impacted many sectors of the economy, but the impact of disease on the higher education industry is not well documented. The purpose of this study is to explore how higher education institutional student recruitment staff responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. This study explores the perspectives of international student recruitment staff in eight small to medium-sized institutions in Canada to understand the impact of the pandemic on their practice and to generate insights for policymakers to consider when planning the future of international student recruitment (ISR). The study found that these recruiters perceived their size to be a disadvantage and that the pandemic highlighted the inequities within higher education. Furthermore, recruiters feared the competitive position of small to medium-sized institutions is potentially deteriorating with implications on policy, resources, and internal relationships within HEIs.

Keywords COVID-19 · International student recruitment · Higher education

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Introduction

COVID-19 has forced higher education institutions (HEIs) worldwide to alter their operations with significant impacts on students and institutions (Altbach and de Wit, 2020). The pandemic has impacted over "3.9 million international and foreign students studying in OECD countries" (UNESCO, 2020). The European Union (2020) attributes a shortfall in applications for visas in OECD countries to the prevalent closures of consulates and the implementation of entry bans by countries worldwide. All over the world countries and HEIs are experiencing changes as classes move online (Strods et al., 2021). While the outlook for future years is looking more promising, the impact of the pandemic on HEIs may have long-lasting impacts. The current literature on COVID-19 and HEIs focuses on student mobility and experiences (Chirikov and Soria, 2020; Firang, 2020), teaching and learning (Ahlburg, 2020; Birrell, 2020; Schleicher, 2020), and the financial viability of HEIs (Carnegie et al., 2022; Thatcher et al., 2020). There is still much unknown about how HEIs experienced the pandemic and their internal reactions and responses to the crisis.

ISR is an essential strategy for many HEIs. The tuition and fees that international students bring to HEIs have become an important contributor to their economic growth since the 1980s (Koh, 2002). This environment creates a competitive landscape for countries and HEIs who strive to compete for lucrative international student fees (de Wit, 2015). The outcome of this environment is that HEIs undertake advanced ISR techniques and investments in resources to compete in the global market for these students (James and Derrick, 2020). HEIs are attempting to respond to the impact of the pandemic on their institutions by adapting these recruitment tactics to online and virtual methods, adjusting enrolment expectations, and managing their workforce (Dennis, 2020). This study helps to understand the adaptations to ISR strategies by HEIs and how staff at these institutions view the pandemic as shaping their work. There is little understanding of how HEIs internally reacted to the dramatic shift in the international student market. This study explores the perspectives of ISR staff in eight institutions in Canada to understand the impact of the pandemic on their practice and to generate insights into the policies of HEIs.

Literature Review

COVID-19 and Student Mobility

International students have faced uncertainty since the start of the pandemic. These students face challenges in their ability to travel, obtain visas, complete their degrees, and pay for their tuition (Altbach and de Wit, 2020). The travel concerns of these students are well documented (Ross, 2020). However, the mobility of international students is not only due to travel restrictions. Many students are

concerned about their parents' ability to contribute to their overseas education. The tuition fees for international students are notably substantial (and regularly increasing in Canada) for many international students (Statistics Canada, 2021). A recent study exploring international students showed that "...83% of respondents believe their future travel plans will be restricted, and 63% believe their parents' savings will decrease because of the virus" (Dennis, 2020, 7). As a result, the economic downturn caused by COVID-19 may have a lasting impact on some families who can no longer afford education abroad.

Furthermore, work opportunities shape international students' decision-making and choice of country. For those international students who are unable to enter receiving countries, "students are also losing out on other benefits of international mobility such as international exposure, access to a foreign job market, and networking" (OECD, 2020). International students are concerned with economic opportunities as the pandemic impacted available job opportunities (Hawley et al., 2021). A study on Chinese students found that parents significantly influenced students' decision-making and that parents valued employment opportunities in the host country (Mok et al., 2021). The policies of HEIs and countries toward post-study work visas greatly influence students' financial capability and interest in overseas study.

Marginson (2020) argues that changes to international student mobility have led HEIs to rethink their recruiting methods and increase pressure on HEIs to ensure sustainable revenue models. The potential negative impact for HEIs is substantial. Marginson further suggests that competition for international students will increase as countries and institutions face financial pressure from declining enrolments. Furthermore, he argues that a shrinking international student market will increase competition and potentially create new entrants (regions and countries) to the market (Marginson, 2020). Countries' COVID-19 entrance policies are unique, and parts of the world may recover and adjust to the virus at a different pace. Furthermore, the factors that influence international students to choose a HEI may change due to the pandemic. These potential changes will inevitably require HEIs to reflect on their ISR strategies and revise their approach to prospective students (Bebbington, 2021).

Traditional Recruitment Methods and Student Decision-Making

Previous studies of international student decision-making and choice of institution illustrate the complex nature of choosing a place and institution to study (Briggs, 2006; Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002; Szekeres, 2010). The result from some of these studies are a conceptual model of international students' decision-making process described as pull-push factors or internal and external factors that shape the choice of institution and country of study (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002). Another key theme of previous research on student decision-making is HEI marketing communications and how students seek information on programs and institutions (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006), such as reference groups or influencers (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002). In addition, many prior studies have categorized dimensions of student criteria such as satisfaction, image, price, value, facilities, social value, and employment opportunities (Binsardi and Ekwulugo,

2003; Maringe, 2006). These studies demonstrate the myriad of factors that influence international student choice of institution and country, but also bring greater understanding of student decision-making that informs HEIs' strategies for ISR (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2010).

HEIs use a variety of recruitment tactics to influence international students to attend their institution (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2010). These activities encompass tactics such as attending educational fairs, visiting high schools, campus visits, contracting educational agents, producing marketing and promotional materials, and developing social media communications targeted toward prospective students (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2010; Vrontis et al., 2018). In Canada, by the late 1990s HEIs rapidly began expanding their overseas ISR by attending recruitment fairs and hiring educational agents (McCartney, 2021). Canadian HEIs adoption of these tactics was pervasive: "*By 2014, more than 80% of Canadian institutions were participating in overseas recruitment fairs, and more than half employed student recruiters or agents to increase the number of international undergraduates on their campuses*" (Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, 2014, as cited in McCartney, 2021, p. 40). These ISR tactics were initiated by HEIs, arguably for the revenue associated with international students and the increasing competition for these lucrative students (McCartney, 2021).

COVID-19 has led some institutions to increase their reliance on educational agents since "*...agents have become important players in the competitive global environment of international student recruitment*" (Denisova-Schmidt et al., 2020, 8). Many HEIs in Western countries have used educational agents for decades in recruiting international students. With COVID-19, this relationship is evolving and requires attention from HEIs and policymakers. There are calls for greater control over educational agents in higher education: "*...with ever more students being recruited to universities through agents, greater transparency about their work for universities is, in our view, long overdue*" (Raimo et al., 2021, 7). Educational agents play an important role for many HEIs and there is much unknown about the experiences of international student recruiters as they manage agent relationships and adapt their recruitment tactics during the pandemic.

Face-to-face interaction between prospective students, recruiters, and agents is an essential strategy for many HEIs (Wen and Tian, 2022). Recruitment efforts may also be less obvious such as partnerships with other HEIs, articulation agreements, presentations by faculty, and study abroad opportunities (Choudaha et al., 2013). Activities that improve the awareness of an institution and its reputation are considered less formal ISR but contribute to the marketing and brand of an institution (Choudaha et al., 2013; Mosneaga and Agergaard, 2012). However, reliance on face-to-face interaction continues to dominate ISR strategies: "*...a major feature of these long-established methods is the 'face-to-face contact' with potential students. The Internet impact consequently guided universities to design and integrate websites for marketing and recruitment of students*" (Vrontis et al., 2018, 85). As Vrontis et al. argue, HEIs have invested in some digital technologies over the years. However, face-to-face recruitment tactics have continued to be the predominant method of ISR. The pandemic has altered traditional ISR methods as in-person interaction has been reduced or travel has been eliminated. (Strods et al., 2021). This study

explores this "pivot" from traditional ISR methods to pandemic-induced tactics and how recruiters experienced these changes.

Changes to International Student Recruitment Landscape

Post-pandemic international efforts for HEIs are still unknown. Some researchers call for the "reimagining" of internationalization (El Masri and Sabzalieva, 2020) to address the post-pandemic environment. Other researchers suggest that not all HEIs will survive the crisis and that "...there is little doubt that some HEIs will capitalize and flourish, and others will suffer catastrophic failure (Senior et al., 2021, 2). This finding implies that institutions must reassess their approaches to policies if they want to maintain robust internationalization throughout their programs in the future. ISR can be viewed as a HEI policy that requires careful consideration of national policies and political environments (Sá and Sabzalieva, 2018). El Masri and Sabzalieva (2020) argue that institutions can reinvent international education through more sustainable and reciprocal models and should change their methods rather than "...relying on recruiting international students, there is a role for government in providing funding to lead the creation of innovative international partnership models" (p. 326). The changes to traditional models or strategies that HEIs may use post-pandemic are yet to be determined. Studies suggest online course delivery and degrees will expand, institutions will increase efforts to recruit international students already living in their countries, institutions will eliminate admissions testing, and overseas face-to-face recruitment will diminish (Skinner et al., 2020). While these are all possible future changes to HEI policy, many HEIs continue to rely on the financial benefits of international students (Thatcher et al., 2020), thus significant shifts in internationalization policies will take time. As a result, it is important to examine the current situation in ISR and the experiences of HEIs' recruitment staff to inform and shape future policy directions.

According to Akiba (2021), "*Circumstances related to the COVID-19 pandemic have made international travel impractical, and the future of internationalization in higher education remains uncertain*" (p. 326). Adjustments to recruitment tactics have been possible through the availability and efficiency of technology (Vrontis et al., 2018). HEIs have continued to build relationships and connections with international students through virtual means. Students, families, HEIs, and recruiters may not deem virtual methods as effective as face-to-face meetings, but in the interest of safety virtual meetings are viewed as an alternative in terms of communication with prospective international students (El Masri and Sabzalieva, 2020). It is unclear how long restrictions will remain in place and how people will feel about international travel in the future. This uncertainty has implications as international students' decision-making is still shaped by government policies, financial capabilities, and personal safety (Mok et al., 2021). However, institutions need to plan. "*All good future-focused thinking begins with a clear, unvarnished, and realistic view of the current state of the institution*" (Lemoine and Richardson, 2020, 49). HEIs must recognize increasing competition globally while addressing their recruitment operations and reflecting on what they can learn from the pandemic. As funding

becomes increasingly important to institutions, ISR will become a necessary strategy to address institutional sustainability (Marginson, 2011).

Methodology

Research Design

This paper uses the case study method to explore the experiences and perceptions of ISR staff at eight HEIs in Canada. The study compares the perceptions and experiences of these individuals regarding the impact of COVID-19 on their ability to recruit students from international destinations. In the context of this study, the case study method helps generate deep insight into recruitment staff experiences that can assist in shaping higher education strategy (James-MacEachern, 2018; McCutcheon and Meredith, 1993). Case study research is helpful as it allows for several data sources in real-world contexts where there was no previous research before (Jensen and Rodgers, 2002). As such, the case study method is particularly relevant to COVID-19 and its impact on higher education. Furthermore, case study research is suited to examining real-life context as the research can capture and provide detailed accounts of data complexities not found in other types of research (Yin, 2012). The case study method can contribute to an understanding of the COVID-19 pandemic on the experiences of HEIs' recruitment staff as they seek to recruit students internationally.

Generating the Case Studies and the Participant Sample

The case study institutions are eight universities in Canada that can be described as small to medium size in student population. While there is no conclusive definition for a small or medium-sized HEI, the study chose institutions based on the size of the student population (Universities Canada, 2021). Initially the sampling strategy was purposive and involved contacting recruitment staff in small to medium-sized Canadian institutions. Those who responded favourably were asked to recommend other potential institutions and participants based on the established criteria 1) student population, 2) actively recruiting international students, and 3) not ranked as one of Canada's top institutions (that is, none are ranked in the top 800 in the world) (Times Higher Education, 2020). The study intends to explore the impact of COVID-19 on HEIs and their ISR efforts, and smaller institutions share similar characteristics beyond merely the student population. These institutions are not top-ranked schools, their recruitment resources are relatively small, and they rely on international students for revenue streams to their institutions. These case study institutions in this study range in size between 1800 and 15,000 students. This study's institutional size is crucial as the international recruitment landscape is uniquely different for these smaller, less well-known HEIs. While other institutions tend to have well-known brands, rankings, and programs, this study explores the unique perspective of student recruitment staff in a particular institutional context:

smaller to medium-sized institutions without the resources or status of other institutions in Canada (Hazelkorn, 2018). Each case study institution recruits students from international markets for undergraduate programs, however, they also offer graduate-level programs. Their international enrolment ranges from 8 to 34% of their total student enrolments.

Semi-structured interviews were the primary method to collect data. Semi-structured interviewing techniques allowed for flexibility to explore the participants' perspectives of the pandemic as it is a complex and evolving situation (Fylan, 2005). The interview guide was designed to elicit the subjects' perspectives and obtain an in-depth view of the tensions experienced in dealing with the pandemic and its impact on their practice. Thirteen semi-structured interviews ($n = 13$) were conducted with staff at eight institutions. The interview guide was designed to explore several key areas: government and institutional policies, responses and reactions to the pandemic, challenges and opportunities, and future planning.

The study's participants were recruitment leadership staff involved in the recruitment of international students to their institution. In some instances, this involved more than one individual as duties and responsibilities differed by institution. The sample consists of staff members (as defined by the organizational structure in each recruitment office) responsible for resources, budgets, planning, or directly interfacing with international students (See Table 1). Saturation point, meaning a sufficient number of individuals at each institution were interviewed, was achieved and measured by ensuring the individuals who have these responsibilities were interviewed (Guba and Lincoln, 1989; Palinkas et al., 2015). Given a limited number of these individuals, the sample's saturation point was easy to identify. In the end, the study involved thirteen interviews across the eight institutions. The interviews were conducted via Zoom from December 2020 to January 2021, and the interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. The timing of these interviews is essential, as this provided the participants time to reflect on their initial responses to the pandemic in March 2020 and to examine the evolution of pandemic responses and impacts on their work. At the time of the interviews, the pandemic was still actively restricting individuals and students' global and national mobility. These restrictions created real-time crisis responses and reactions from the participants, which is highly useful in exploring their perceptions and discovering new insights to address the future of ISR.

Analysis

As noted above, the interview questions were designed to explore the participants' involvement, experiences, reflections, and reactions to the pandemic on the practice of recruiting students from international markets. The interviews were transcribed and imported into NVivo 12.0 for Mac (QSR) for data storage, organization, and analysis. Content analysis was employed to analyze the interviews in two steps. First, each interview was analyzed to find themes in individual participant responses. Then a cross-case analysis (between each HEI) was employed to compare responses from each case study institution (Stake, 2013). Themes were then developed to compare

Table 1 Participant sample

Title	Responsibility	Experience
Director, Student Recruitment	Domestic and international student recruitment planning and implementing	10+ years
Associate Vice -President International	International student recruitment, academic exchanges, international partnerships, and international settlement	25+ years
Director, Student Recruitment and Retention	Domestic and international recruitment and retention planning and implementation	20+ years
Director, International Student Recruitment	Recruitment of all international students and settlement	25+ years
International Student Advisor	Recruiting and advising first year international students	7+ years
Student Success Leader	Recruiting international and domestic students including settlement	7+ years
International Student Advisor	Recruiting and advising first year international students	5+ years
Direction of Internationalization	International student recruitment, international academic partnerships, and international exchange	20+ years
Student Success Leader	Recruiting international and domestic students including settlement	10+ years
Director, Recruitment and Marketing	Student recruitment and institutional marketing	25+ years
International Recruitment Specialist	Overseas international student recruitment	15+ years
Director, Recruitment and Admissions	Domestic and international student recruitment and admissions	15+ years
Director, Enrollment Management and International Operations	All recruitment, admissions, and international exchanges and partnerships	25+ years

the case studies and the participant responses. In each stage of the analysis, open coding was used to identify themes in the data.

Results

The results show that participants experienced, for the most part, similar reactions to the impact of COVID-19 on ISR. Unsurprisingly, the study showed that the pandemic had a profound impact on the work and experiences of ISR staff, but more importantly, the participants see the future of ISR as transposed. However, what this new arrangement will look like is unknown. Nonetheless, the participants identified important institutional and government policy factors for the effective recovery of ISR in a post-pandemic environment.

The purpose of this study is to explore how HEI student recruitment staff responded to the COVID-19 pandemic and what policymakers can learn from their experiences. The study's participants were asked to discuss their various responses and reactions to the pandemic and how they view ISR now and in the future. This research identified four main themes from the participant interviews: (1) inconsistent government policy, (2) amplified existing institutional relationships, (3) transformation of staff, tactics, and knowledge, and (4) deteriorating competitive position of small to medium-sized HEIs. These themes are discussed below.

1. Inconsistent government policies

The study's participants at each institution conveyed a level of empathy for governments and their responses to COVID-19, including the federal government's decision to place Canadian public health over the arrival of international students. The participants expressed that the pandemic created uncharted territory for governments, HEIs, and the entire globe, and these unusual circumstances required compassion for students and policymakers.

I feel bad for the students, you know because they are in this waiting game. But I also have been telling [these students] and trying [convey] that nobody knows what is going on, nobody could have predicted this and how long and how fast, and so I think the federal government has been doing what they can to balance public interest, public safety, public perceptions and then the needs of international students (participant 3).

The participants expressed a sense of resignation regarding the pandemic itself and its challenges to the government. At the same time, participants were frustrated by the government's slow responses over the initial months of the pandemic. These senior recruitment staff viewed the initial response by the Canadian government to close the borders to international arrivals, and hence students, as a prudent and necessary step. However, participants experienced various levels of disappointment with the federal government's late reaction to international student arrivals and the future for the Post-Graduate Work Permit Program (PGWPP). The Canadian government

announced in August 2020 that international students might study online full-time outside of Canada if they had completed 50 percent of their studies in Canada (CIC, 2020 <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/coronavirus-covid19/students.html#exemptions>).

Certainly [these government decisions] cost us students. If they [federal government] would have put the policies in place that they did for the fall, if they had made those announcements in May, I think we would have had a chance. Government has been flexible with many things, and they've gotten to the right place. But I just think they have gotten there way too slow (participant 6).

These student recruitment staff understood the need for flexibility during the pandemic and that policies would evolve and change over time. The most significant issue with government policies was the gap in the communication and inconsistent interpretation of these policies changes amongst various government departments and the various levels of governments involved in the pandemic response. The federal government restricted international travelers to Canada unless there were important reasons to enter the country. The conditions on essential travel appeared confusing to international students and the HEI recruitment teams: *"There was much confusion with respect to what students needed and what was considered essential travel and what was not, you know, or our students studying abroad considered, you know, on an exchange that is essential?"* (participant 10).

The main issues for international student recruiters are the lack of consistent messaging and interpretation between border agents, immigration officials, and political leaders. The inconsistent interpretations of essential travel and eligibility requirements for international students increased apprehension for those recruiting students. The leaders of these recruitment teams demonstrated a keen responsibility to these students and their families and were concerned about student welfare and the institutional reputation. The pressure to ensure the safety of the students was evident in each interview, and the inconsistency between government agencies impeded the ability to communicate honestly and effectively.

2. Amplified existing institutional relationships

An interesting discovery in this study is that there was a high degree of consultation between administrative leadership and the ISR staff in each case. The participants shared that administrative leadership was consulting with them and requesting direction. The participants viewed this as a supportive environment and that those who were responsible for recruitment were seen as the subject matter experts: *"The collaborative approach that the senior management showed this year was amazing, and they understand that the people they hired are there for a reason"* (participant 3).

This view seemed to be shaped by the view that leadership had academic experience rather than professional administrative leadership: *"The senior people are academics, most of them. Their background is not sales and marketing and relationship*

management. Every time I had a good idea, they would support it in a business way" (participant 6).

For the most part, participants felt their knowledge and insight were respected by senior administration. They were empowered to do what it takes to continue recruiting students from international markets, even though the situation was confusing and budgets were unstable or diminishing. Participants described providing intelligence or information to senior administrators who are struggling to determine enrolments and their budgets for the upcoming year.

At the same time, the rapidly changing environment strained relationships between academics and recruitment. Participants described that there was tension between academics and recruitment prior to the pandemic.

There is some pushback there when there is uncertainty as to numbers [of international students]. In the past, we were pretty comfortable using a certain percentage of deposits as a proxy to determine enrolments. But now we've taken way more deposits, and we have got tons of room because we have moved to online learning, and faculty are not as comfortable with that, and they freak out a little bit when they see the number of deposits in their programs, but that is where the pushback has come from – being a registered [student] prior to receiving a visa, because then the student may be leaving the course midway through or not coming at all (participant 8).

The "pushback" described by some participants is not new to the recruitment/academic relationship (James and Derrick, 2020); however, managing change during the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the tension between these departments. Faculty were adjusting to online learning, and for some, this was entirely new. At the same time, faculty could not effectively plan for student enrolment and manage resources. This feedback is not an unnatural response, but it shows that these previously strained relationships are experiencing more significant pressure under these circumstances. As one participant stated, *"These are all things that are incredibly amplified as a result of the pandemic"* (participant 9).

3. Transformation of staff, tactics, and knowledge

All the recruitment staff identified institutional structural changes because of the impact of COVID-19. Each participant described a rapid shift in the recruitment landscape that required the immediate return of overseas staff, which was time-consuming and stressful. Once the shock of COVID-19 had become a reality, there were many changes for recruitment staff. These changes included job descriptions/role changes for staff, restructuring of recruitment teams, budget cuts, resignations, and layoffs. In several instances, recruitment staff resigned, which was attributed to two main factors – the individual need for change and the entry-level nature of these positions. *"One of my staff resigned because of her personal life – [she told me] my dating life is taking a hit, I live by myself, I am lonely all my friends live elsewhere, and I cannot travel"* (participant 7).

Participants described a young workforce who took the opportunity to make changes in their lives, either personally or professionally. Some staff was forced to leave due to budget cuts and lack of work, and others resigned and upgraded their education or took better-paying jobs.

Some (staff) were laid off, just because we do not have enough financials to cover everybody's role. So, for those who got laid off, their job duty got distributed among the rest of the team. And some went part-time for a bit, but the same job was still required you know, you cannot do these jobs part-time. You have emails and requests from the students. There are some of them that are urgent, so you cannot really be part-time (participant 1).

Recruitment staff also adjusted their workforce, and they designed some of these changes to develop or leverage new skills in the digital and virtual sales realm, while others were merely to manage expected reductions in budgets or perceived lack of work by administrative leadership. The participants described a perception within their institutions that recruitment work was drastically reduced and not as demanding. They felt that administrative leaders and other departments did not fully appreciate that their workload changed drastically but did not diminish, although recruiters could no longer travel. For recruiters they had to learn new modes of recruitment and marketing, while at the same time, staff who were usually traveling now were working on a 24/7 schedule with minimal downtime. Recruitment staff explained that before the pandemic, recruiters who traveled worked a scheduled day – now, there were no limits on space or time.

Our day is not 830 to 430. For instance, there are two fairs that I was up until 2 am doing. Or you get up very early and start at 6 am. I did one of those this week, and I had a meeting last night until 930 because you are dealing with different time zones. You have to be more flexible with your schedule (participant 4).

There was often a mismatch between the resources available and the skills needed in all cases. Digital skills, not surprisingly, were in demand, but recruitment staff did not have budgets, permission, or time to train individuals in digital skills. Other staff had positions that required in-person contact, and now their work was no longer required. These changes in workflow meant redeploying staff to other roles within the department or related departments such as admissions, and the admissions process became the focus of the marketing efforts to ensure conversion from those prospective students who paid deposits. International student conversion (a metric of those students who applied and ultimately attended the institution) was unknown, and recruitment was under immense pressure to convince these students who previously committed to the institution to continue their plans despite the unknowns of the pandemic and student visas.

The new, completely virtual environment dramatically changed how recruitment staff viewed their work. The job change was more than simply conducting recruitment via Zoom. As one participant stated, "*How do we do our actual job*

now in a virtual environment, rather than can we pivot and get set up to work from home?" (participant 8).

The types of recruitment tactics used in the past were no longer relevant, such as campus tours and in-person fairs, which resulted in declining lead generation from these contacts. For the most part, the participants realized that digital skills had been necessary to compete with other institutions prior to the pandemic, but this investment had been slow, and there was an insufficient capability to transition to a completely virtual environment. The lack of digital skills meant that the recruitment team was *"doing a lot more work"* (participant 9), creating tension in practice and within the institution as staff coped with limitations on skills and time.

The recruitment efforts, as described above, did continue with dramatic modifications. However, recruitment staff now work on a 24/7 clock, but institutions also became inundated with new companies seeking to take advantage of the remote recruitment environment. For these HEIs, they could not assess these new actors to determine their skills or legitimacy.

I have seen a noticeable difference on the vendor side of things. Every day I am contacted by at least a dozen vendors from around the world, all claiming to have that silver bullet to solve all my problems. They are becoming more aggressive in the way that compared to what they had been in the past, and it was more like 'hey here is a product that we have, I think there might be a fit' from people who have no experience in the higher education sector - they are trying to capitalize on this and make a buck and everything (participant 5).

At the same time, educational agents became even more instrumental to these HEIs. Recruitment staff portrayed prospective students and their parents as requiring more support, yet HEIs were now solely reliant on agents or educational representatives to provide face-to-face contact when available. All the institutions in the study described the importance of educational agents prior to the pandemic and that these relationships were built, over time, in person. Now, as agents became increasingly instrumental, these relationships were challenging to build virtually and in a short time: *"Maintaining relationships with existing agents has not been a problem, but I think building new relationships has been challenging. Many times, you build them in person"* (participant 6).

An apparent reason for the increased need for agents is the lack of in-person recruitment capability. Nevertheless, another surprising development for these HEIs was the discovery of new markets during the pandemic. Several participants expressed that their traditional markets were still important, but there were leads from potential students from markets that they had never visited in the past: *"All of a sudden, you had people [inquiring] from markets that are not your formal markets, and you know you can engage them [in virtual fairs]"* (participant 3). For many participants, the pandemic uncovered opportunities for market development that were not apparent previously, or they had previously lacked the resources to explore them. The pandemic, in certain circumstances, changed the source of leads for these institutions and identified future market opportunities.

4. Deteriorating competitive position of small to medium-sized institutions

One of the most interesting findings in this study is the relative disadvantage of being a small to medium-sized HEI during COVID-19. For these institutions recruiting students from international markets during the pandemic intensified their challenges in global markets. The participants articulated that small to medium-sized institutions do not have the brands, additional resources, and rankings of larger, well-resourced institutions; this is not a new situation but the pandemic increased the barriers for small to medium-sized institutions. The participants perceived resource disparity between larger HEIs and those in this study illuminated areas of potential weakness for these smaller institutions. For example, all respondents described the ambiguity associated with student visas as problematic. However, an equally important recruitment tool for the study's institutions is the policy for international students on the Post-Graduate Work Permit Program (PGWPP) offered by the Canadian government.

You know to be completely honest, they are [international students] not coming necessarily for the education; they are coming for the opportunity to immigrate. They did not want to take a chance because the post-graduate work permit and everything were not quite clear at the time (participant 7).

For many smaller institutions, the recruitment staff described the competitiveness of Canada on a global scale as an advantage for them due to student visas and the PGWPP. In some institutions, the participants recognized that their competitive differentiation was not based on their academic programs or reputation but rather on a combination of factors that relied heavily on the Canadian government's favourable student immigration policies. These policies enable Canadian institutions to attract students for work opportunities, and, in turn, this creates revenue streams for these institutions (Mok et al., 2021).

The uncertainty of these policies and their future caused tremendous pressure within the recruitment teams. The work itself had profoundly changed, but the expectations to continue to meet recruitment targets for many did not. *"At the end of the day, the budgets are the budgets, and that is the philosophy - we are just going to move ahead because we do not know what our budget is going to look like from the government"* (participant 8).

Discussion

The global pandemic has undoubtedly changed the nature of work worldwide and for the people working in higher education. The work of international student recruiters is undergoing profound and meaningful shifts, and it is still in a state of flux. Exploring the perspectives of the staff of ISR as they live through these changes can help researchers and policymakers benchmark these changes and gain insights that can shape the future of recruiting students to HEIs. This study explored the perspectives of ISR staff in eight small to medium-sized institutions in Canada to understand the

impact of the pandemic on their practice and to generate insights into how policy-makers need to consider the future landscape of ISR. This study found that small to medium-sized institutional recruitment staff view their competitive position as unique from larger institutions, bringing unique challenges to their future operations in ISR. The study showed that the pandemic highlighted existing tensions and issues within institutional ISR. These tensions include government policies, amplified relationships within HEIs, changing staff and their skills and knowledge, and small to medium-sized HEI competitiveness.

The study showed that as the mode of ISR changed due to the pandemic, from primarily in-person to virtual, there were few standards or resources available to institutions to sort through this new environment. HEIs, particularly these institutions, are relying on educational agents, technology providers, and other vendors to reach students and families around the world. However, there is a lack of resources and knowledge to assess these potential partners properly. As previous literature found (Raimo et al., 2021), governments and institutions need to pay greater attention to these third-party providers and create standards, transparency, and guidance so that not only smaller institutions receive credible support but all institutions.

Policymakers and institutional leaders also need to consider the policies that impact small to medium-sized HEIs' ability to recruit. These institutions are not the same as some of their larger, well-resourced counterparts. Their reliance on government funding and student revenue, including international student tuition, makes these institutions financially vulnerable to these types of market shocks. As the literature shows, (competition will most likely increase, and smaller institutions are disadvantaged with already limited budgets and potentially declining enrolments (Hawley et al., 2021; Marginson, 2020; Mok et al., 2021). Government policymakers need to consider policies that will enable these institutions to generate much-needed income or funding to ensure sustainable futures.

HEIs are experiencing a transformation in their marketing. Much is unknown about how the pandemic will shape the future of in-person ISR. Nonetheless, there are learnings from this pandemic "pivot" that may assist HEIs in improving their marketing efforts in overseas destinations. The study highlighted the focus on budgets and sales necessary for institutional sustainability. Policymakers should examine their reliance on international students and the volatility of these sources of revenue that may impact their programs and staff (El Masri and Sabzalieva, 2020).

Furthermore, the nature of the work conducted by recruitment staff tends to be done by junior staff. This organizational structure creates an unstable workforce – both in terms of turnover and long-term institutional knowledge. The study and the pandemic highlighted the importance of digital skills and virtual connectivity, and for most of these HEIs, they experienced a lack of depth in these areas that were known to them prior to the pandemic.

Conclusion

The study's findings present opportunities to learn from the pandemic and adapt to the changing ISR environment. As described, the case study institutions shared similarities in how their recruitment teams responded to the pandemic. Their reflections showed that they viewed their size as a disadvantage and that the pandemic highlighted existing tensions in their ISR. This study shows that the pandemic has exacerbated communications problems between governments and institutions and within the institutions themselves. Government and HEIs need to consider not only their policies and communications during crises, but they also need to address underlying structural weaknesses in higher education. Institutions are not all equal. HEIs have different resources, student populations, and programs and attract students due to these distinctions. Policies should consider and distinguish between these HEIs and their needs to ensure sustainability. The study has practical implications for institutional and government policymakers. The study highlights that HEIs can modify institutional structures and processes, but they lack expertise and resources in digital technologies as new traditional forms of recruitment take shape. Furthermore, this study demonstrates that developing a flexible and market-responsive ISR strategy is vital in an increasingly competitive ISR marketplace. This study contributes to the underexplored area of internal ISR operations within HEIs and, more importantly, shows staff experiences during the pandemic. The existing literature focuses on the student viewpoint before the pandemic (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002; Findlay et al., 2017) and during the pandemic (Chirikov and Soria, 2020; Firang, 2020). This research expands the literature by showing how ISR staff at HEIs perceived the pandemic and what they learned from their experiences.

Qualitative research has limitations on generalizability, and, as such, this study's findings provide implications rather than generalizations; further research on the impact of the pandemic from the institutional perspective is needed to validate the findings. The research did not examine the student perspective of ISR, other institutional actors' perspectives, or other sized institutions. The study aims to add to existing research on the impact of the pandemic on ISR, but further research on other actors, jurisdictions, and larger-sized institutions would be worthwhile to provide comparisons and add greater insight.

Declaration

Conflict of interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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