Australian policy on international students: pivoting towards discourses of diversity?

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Received: 2 October 2020 / Accepted: 18 April 2022 / Published online: 17 May 2022 © The Australian Association for Research in Education, Inc. 2022

Abstract

As the third-largest export industry, international education occupies an important place in the Australian economy and society. Employing Bacchi’s “What is the Problem Represented to be” (WPR) approach, this paper critically analyses four key policies pertaining to international students in Australia since the 1990s. Drawing upon theorising of the globalisation of international education policy, we uncover contestation and problem representation in discourses around the economisation of education and of international students’ experiences. The findings reveal multiple discourses of the problematisation of diversity at play, including a “pivot” towards protection of international students’ rights as consumers and as potential future citizens, and increased attention to the intrinsic value of international students as people, and not simply as economic agents. The findings have implications for other national contexts, in which international students contribute to the economic viability of education, and in which internationalisation of education in universities has the capacity to foster enhanced cross-cultural understanding.

Keywords International students · International education · Globalisation · Policy discourses · Diversity

Introduction

Australia has a long history and strong capacity to recruit international students, especially international students from Asia. These students are attracted to Australia’s high-quality, relatively low-cost education, comparative safety, and convenient

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geographical location. As the third-largest export industry, international education is essential to both Australian higher education and to the national economy. This has been very evident with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the number of international students able to come to Australia. At the same time, the cultural, economic and social capital international students provide are valuable to both universities and the nation. Thus, how national policies constitute international students in the context of increased internationalisation of education policy is an important area of inquiry.

However, this is also a contested space. In the Canadian context, Stein and de Andreotti (2016) studied the reception of international students as sources of cash/funding and intellectual capital, as “unworthy” competitors with local students, and as recipients of “charity” in the form of western knowledge—all reflective of a dominant global imaginary that frames international students as inferior to the western ideals and educational experiences against which they are portrayed. Lomer (2018) studied international students in UK policy discourses, revealing students were seen as sources of income, immigrants of doubtful value, and consumers of educational services, while at the same time engaging in a general process of “othering” of such students. In the Australian context, international students are described as a highly vulnerable, exploitable workforce and sometimes facing discrimination (Evans, 2016). However, there is still relatively little research on the rights and wellbeing of international students, even as this is an area of increasing attention in law and educational policy (Ramia, 2017), including in the Australian context. There is also relatively little research that flags alternative discourses about students “becoming” the people they wish to be (Tran, 2016) and alternatives to more dominant tropes about international students as sources of income for universities, as deficit in relation to dominant capacities, and as on linear trajectories that are predominantly future oriented (Lipura & Collins, 2020).

How are international students actually constructed and positioned in key Australian policy discourses? This paper seeks to explore this question, with a particular focus upon the nature of the “problem” of the study and living arrangements for international students constituted in four key policies. These were identified as the key federal government policies focussed on enhancing the internationalisation of education in Australia since the 1990s.

Theorising globalised education policy discourses

In relation to education policy more broadly, but relevant to international education, Ball (2005) makes a distinction between policy as text and policy as discourse. In later work, he argued that policies are “contested”, “mediated and differentially represented by different actors in different contexts (policy as text)”, while “produced and formed by taken-for-granted and implicit knowledge and assumptions about the world and ourselves (policy as discourse)” (Ball, 2015, p. 311). Policy texts and policy ensembles are framed by discourses that enable us to better understand and grasp the actual policy text and its intentions. Policy is about change (Weimer & Vining, 2017); indeed, “[p]olicy desires or imagines change—it offers an imagined future
state of affairs, but in articulating desired change always offers an account somewhat more simplified than the actual realities of practice” (Rizvi & Lingard, 2009, p. 5).

Policy is also heavily influenced by the conditions of its development and enactment. In international education, this includes broader global processes. Held et al. (2000) offer a widely utilised definition of globalisation that emphasises the expansion and “speeding up” of intercontinental and transnational flows of social relations and transactions. The ascendancy of neoliberalism, together with “new public management”, have produced a fundamental shift in the way educational institutions have defined and justified their institutional existence during the 1980s and 1990s (Pierson, 2000). Under neoliberalism, education has been transformed from a public good to a private good whereby parents and students, as the “consumers” of education, are positioned as rational and self-interested in making choices in education. However, Apple (2017) argues that neoliberalism is a movement that is not unitary and may have contradictory tendencies and take various forms under different contexts and in particular instantiations in different nations.

Consequently, even as they are heavily influenced by economistic discourses in policy, “[i]nternational students are not just economic units but complex people” (Sawir et al., 2009, p. 46). According to Lomer (2017), “international education is a field of globalised policy discourses, with multiple power differentials” (p. 25). Sawir et al. (2009) identified three traditions or regimes of student security: the pastoral tradition, consumer protection and quasi-citizenship. Under the pastoral tradition, international students are regarded as dependent subjects and education institutions need to provide welfare for them. Consumer protection regimes treat international students as consumers of education, while the quasi-citizenship regime offers international students the same protections and entitlements as domestic students but without full citizenship rights. Recently, emerging literatures studying the rights of students as consumers, as well as the broader human rights of international students, have become more prominent, and potent (e.g. Nyland et al., 2009; Robertson, 2011; Tran & Vu, 2016).

In a similar, yet more eclectic vein, Elliott (1998) argues there are four groups of rationales that are relevant for attracting and recruiting international students: political rationale, sociocultural rationale, educational rationale and economic rationale. Affected by different rationales—and because such rationales are often “fuzzy” in policy discourses—international students are positioned and represented across such rationales by multiple and sometimes conflicting logics. Elliott’s approach, grounded in these broader varied discourses about globalisation, can contribute conceptual resources to help analyse the “problem” of international higher education and how international students are positioned and constructed in Australian policy discourses.

In the following sections, we first introduce the context of Australian international education and international students, and then outline the four key policies

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1 We also need to acknowledge the rise of nationalist politics opposed to globalisation across the recent past. These ethnonationalisms have been evident in national dealings with both the Covid pandemic and the climate emergency. (See Rizvi et al., 2022 here, especially, Rizvi, 2022).
that we argue have been pivotal in international higher education in Australia since the 1990s, in focussing attention upon international students’ issues. Distinguishing the different rationales behind these key policy discourses and particularly the different ways in which the “problem” of international higher education is construed in policy, is important for identifying the nature of the differentiated representations of international students in international higher education in Australia within these broader globalised education policy settings. Arguably, these policies helped set the scene for a much more substantive focus upon international higher education issues and concerns in Australia in the subsequent years since their development.

Contextualising international education and international students in Australia

From Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific

Australia is a unique nation, located in the Asian region while having deep historical, cultural and ideological bonds and links with the United Kingdom, Europe and the United States. In that context, Australia has more recently attached great importance to Asia–Australia relations and argued for a geographical focus on the Asia-Pacific, especially in the context of what has been described since the mid to late 1980s as the “Asian Century”, and which has been reaffirmed frequently by Asian political leaders, and is often mentioned in Australian media and policy documents (e.g. *Australia in the Asian Century White Paper 2012*).

More recently, increasing reference has been made to the “Indo-Pacific region”, namely the Indian Ocean and Asia-Pacific region, which has gradually replaced the term “Asia-Pacific” as part of earlier discourses associated with the Asian century. The “Indo-Pacific” appears frequently in the newer policy documents. It implies bringing India into Australia’s strategic frame and reflects India’s crucial position and greater involvement in East Asian affairs (AHC, 2016). India now is the second-largest inbound source market for Australia’s international education, just behind China (Austrade, 2015, p. 5). The changes in targeting regions reflect a rapidly changing global market landscape (Austrade, 2015) and geo-political strategies more broadly.

This attention to both the Asia-Pacific and the Indo-Pacific has also been reflected most recently in concerns about issues of discrimination and racism towards Indian students and Asian students. Such discrimination has been exacerbated most recently during COVID-19. These students are a vulnerable group in Australian society, which calls for more attention and consideration in policymaking.

Immigration policy and international students

The relation between international student programmes and skilled migration policy is close, and has been reflected in changes to such policy in different periods of government. Table 1 provides an overview of these changing relationships.
Australian policy on international students: pivoting towards…

| Government                      | Howard coalition | Rudd–Gillard labour | Abbott coalition | Turnbull coalition | Morrison coalition |
|---------------------------------|------------------|--------------------|------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Time                            | 1997–2007        | 2007–2013          | 2013–2015        | 2016–2018          | 2018–2020          |
| Relationship between international education and migration | Explicit link    | Decouple           | Restore, encourage VET students | No significant change | Extended eligibility for post-study work visas to future students |

Table 1  The relation between international education and migration across five recent Australian governments. Source Adapted from Spinks and Koleth (2016) and Onsen (2020)
Also, when there were changes in immigration policies, there were changes in the Australian international education market (see Fig. 1 below). This suggests that international students are quite sensitive to changing immigration policies. Due to the impact of COVID-19, the issuing of student visas was suspended and the number of international students declined drastically with real impact on the financial circumstances of universities. The future remains uncertain under the shadow of the pandemic. Balancing the relationship between international student programmes and immigration policy is always a challenge for the Australian government. It would be problematic to the economic growth of Australia to either more tightly link or fully decouple them completely (Hamilton, 2017).

Nonetheless, no matter whether international students become skilled migrants or not, they comprise a major component of Australian higher education alumni. The importance of alumni has attracted more and more attention recently (DFAT, 2016). The benefits are not only economic, social and cultural, but also pertain to diplomatic relations. The soft power of this increasing group helps to realise Australian national interest and increase its global and regional impact/influence. Nevertheless, such foci and attention also occur in the context of previous and current relations, including earlier concerns relating to the large-scale training scandal that engulfed both the VET and higher education sector some years ago (cf., ABC, 2015; Onselen, 2020) and the more recent resolute refusal by the federal government to help alleviate the situation of international students in the face of the pandemic (Nguyen & Balakrishnan, 2020). Policies have been changed in the context of the huge financial loss due to international students (Ross, 2020; Thatcher et al., 2020). To respond
to the challenges presented by the pandemic, the Australian government released a new Australian Strategy for International Education 2021–2030 in November 2011, which aims to set out a new diversified, creative and coordinated way to maintain its leading position in the international education market (DESE, 2021). This strategy emphasises the importance of international education to Australian society and the economic, cultural and social benefits it brings to its universities, people and businesses (DESE, 2021). Each of these actions speaks loudly of actual attitudes to international students, and constitutes a more embodied and nuanced account of the realpolitik of international student policy that sits alongside these practices.

**Research method**

In this study, we draw upon Bacchi’s (2009, 2012) approach of “What’s the Problem Represented to be” (WPR) to undertake a critical policy document analysis. Document analysis refers to “any systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents; for ‘finding, selecting, appraising (making sense of), and synthesising data contained in documents—both printed and electronic’” (Bowen, 2009, p. 28, cited in Mackieson et al., 2018, p. 968). Grounded in and informed by discourse theory (e.g. Fairclough, 1989, 2003; Foucault, 1965, 1972), the WPR approach is a resource and tool for conducting critical analysis of public policies. Policy helps constitute social practices in specific times and spaces (Fairclough, 1989; Foucault, 1972) and the construction of a particular “problem” in policy can be seen as a specific characteristic of policy discourses (Lomer, 2017). Focussing on the creation and “solutions” of problems, policy provides government with legitimacy that identifies or names the problems it seeks to resolve (Saarinen, 2008). The way problems and solutions are constructed and represented implies particular logics and rationales of governance. Bacchi (2012) argues, drawing on Foucault’s concept of problematisation, that policies do not respond to problems out there, but rather policies actually discursively construct the problem. Bacchi’s approach proposed a double problematisation: namely the policy constructs the problem, and the analyst problematises the problem construction/representation (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016; Lomer, 2017). This approach is “a much-needed interruption to the presumption that “problems” are fixed and uncontroversial starting points for policy development” (Bacchi, 2012).

The study reported in this paper explored how international students have been actually constructed, portrayed and positioned in policy discourses and the problem representation behind these representations. Thus, this method is a useful and effective tool applied in this study to explore how the government represents international student positioning in the policies.

Four policies have been selected for analysis, namely International Education in Australia Through the 1990s (1992) (hereafter, the Report), the Review of the Educational Services to Overseas Students Act (2009) (hereafter, the Review), International Students Strategy for Australia (2010–2014) (2010) (hereafter, the Strategy), and National Strategy for International Education 2025(2016) (hereafter, the Strategy 2025). These policies have been selected for three main reasons: first, they are key policies encapsulating dramatic reforms in international higher
education in Australia over the period since the 1990s; secondly, they are key federal government policies in relation to the broader economic, social and political development of Australia as these foci intersect with international students policy; thirdly, these policies focus on international students and the role of fostering enhanced educational provision over time; and, fourthly, these policies are the principal policy documents regarding international education and international students published since the 1990s in Australia, and they express key discourses from the government about its relationship with international students.

The WPR approach provides a list of six questions relating to the problem representation, with corresponding objectives (Table 2). The six questions can be selectively asked when applying this approach (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). We start by identifying the “problem” representation (Question 1). Then, we seek the problem meaning and identify how the problem is constructed within the policies (Question 2). We then examine how the specific problem has come to be (Question 3), think about the unproblematised or alternative elements (Question 4), and understand the effects—subjectification effects—of identified problem representations (Question 5). We conclude with how the “problem” could be thought differently (Question 6).

The problem representation in policies is the positioning of international students in the Australian HE context. “International students” are the “subjects” constructed under different categories which are provisional and in ongoing formation. We outline and discuss problematisation and people categories regarding the positioning of international students based on the evidence from the above four policies, particularly in light of Elliott’s (1998) four rationales—political rationale, sociocultural rationale, educational rationale and economic rationale. For instance, from the perspective of the economic rationale, students are constructed as analogous to the subject categories of “cash cow”, “consumer”, “investor” and “skilled worker”.

| Questions                                                                 | Objectives                                                                                     |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Q1. What’s the “problem” represented to be in a specific policy or policy proposal? | To identify implied problem representations in specific policies or policy proposals |
| Q2. What presuppositions or assumptions underpin this representation of the “problem”? | To identify and analyse the conceptual logics that underpin specific problem representations |
| Q3. How has this representation of the “problem” come about?                | To highlight the conditions that allow a particular problem representation to take shape and to assume dominance |
| Q4. What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the “problem” be thought about differently? | To raise for reflection and consideration issues and perspectives silenced in identified problem representations |
| Q5. What effects are produced by this representation of the “problem”?     | To identify the effects of specific problem representations so that they can be critically assessed |
| Q6. How/where has this representation of the “problem” been produced, disseminated and defended? How has it been (or could it be) questioned, disrupted and replaced? | To pay attention both to the means through which some problem representations become dominant, and to the possibility of challenging problem representations that are judged to be harmful |

Table 2 The WPR framework. Source Cited from Chan (2018, pp. 24–25)
detailed critical policy analysis by employing the WPR approach will be provided in the next section.

It is important to note that it is difficult to definitively and unequivocally distinguish the different rationales within which international students are positioned. For example, distinguishing “consumer” from “students/learners” discourses is not as clear-cut as might be assumed; both are apparent, depending on how particular policies are constituted and framed. Human capital theory is evident most overtly in more economistic discourses, although such an approach also impacts other discourses at the same time. However, in this study, we endeavour to identify what we consider primary foci of key policies in light of relevant theorising and language usage. We find that the number of related discourses under the economic rationale is the largest amongst the four policies. This is followed by discourses pertaining to the academic rationale, social rationale and political rationale. We can see international students are positioned predominantly as “consumers” and “learners” in Australian policy documents. In the following sections, we analyse and discuss each role in relation to the various rationales.

Positioning the problem: International students in Australian policy discourses

Economic rationale: from “cash cows” to consumers, investors and skilled workers

It is clear that the economic rationale is dominant in Australian international students’ policies: “The international education sector is also very important economically. It is Australia’s third-largest source of export income” (Strategy, 2010, p. 2), at least up until the pandemic. It “delivered great economic benefit to Australia” (Review, 2009, p. 3) and “brings considerable benefits to our education institutions” (Review, 2009, p. 5). However, international students positioned under this rationale have experienced changes. In this way, the “problem” of how to maintain Australia’s HE sector and economic standing more broadly through the international HE student market has changed over time: from students being construed as “cash cows”, to “consumers”, “investors” and “skilled workers”.

Cash cows

During the earlier stages of large-scale international education, international students seemed to be positioned primarily as an economic solution to tightening fiscal conditions in the provision of higher education in Australia; in the worst instances, they were treated as little more than “cash cows” by unscrupulous agents and education providers, who placed personal and institutional profit-making above students’ educational needs. Stephen Connelly, President of the International Education Association of Australia and Deputy Vice-Chancellor at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology at the time, argued “We are treating it (internationalisation) like a cash cow”; there was insufficient concern about the welfare of students (Craig, 2010). Australian universities were significantly over-reliant on international students
to compensate for reduced public funding in per-student terms. The “problem” of international students in higher education was very much an “economic” one (Q1).

During this earlier period, criticism was expressed about Australia’s narrow economic approach and insufficient recognition of student needs (Report, 1992, p. 5); such criticisms reflect concerns about the economic assumptions that underpinned the model (Q2). In the Review, concerns about positioning international students as “cash cows” were clearly evidenced. The Review (2009) argued: “International education has often been referred to in the context of the export income it has generated” (Review, 2009, p. 2). The Review (2009) went on: “[t]he desire of some providers to pursue the dollar has sometimes, but not always, come at the expense of the quality of the education delivered” (Review, 2009, p. 7). Furthermore, regulatory frameworks were seen as lacking in relation to unscrupulous educational providers: “The education regulatory frameworks have not withstood the test of providers entering and operating in a market where short-term profit is the key driver” (Review, 2009, p. 7). Thus, the sector needs to change the focus to “quality and student experience rather than volume and dollars” (Review, 2009, p. 2). Such concerns came about because of concerns that the HE sector would be diminished by such unscrupulous and exploitative behaviours (Q3).

Consumers

Within broader neoliberal and market-oriented conditions, international students are also often positioned as “consumers” who receive customised educational products and services. As such, they are construed as having consumer rights. This means, as paying customers, they should be offered high-quality education, and efforts need to be undertaken to ensure their wellbeing during their stay in Australia. “Consumerist attitudes” was one of the key headline drivers within higher education (Hazelkorn, 2015). In that sense, in order to attract and sustain “consumers”, providers should offer “quality services”. Again, such concerns came about because of concerns that the HE sector would be diminished if students did not have greater “consumer rights” (Q3).

From an economic perspective, these policies mainly discussed the consumer rights of international students. The focus was upon “strengthen[ing] consumer protection for international students and provid[ing] better information to current and future students” (Strategy, 2010, p. 8). The fourth section of the Strategy was mainly about consumer protection: “Consumer protection is a strength of the Australian education sector focussing on educational services” (Strategy, 2010, p. 21). Under the ESOS Act, international students were entitled to tuition fee protection, adequate education facilities and appropriately qualified teachers (Strategy, 2010).

Recommendations of the Strategy to better support students included advocacy for “stronger consumer protection mechanisms” (Review, 2009 p. 5). Under these circumstances, “[s]tudents should be well-informed consumers, supported by accurate, ethical information and marketing efforts by providers and their education agents” (Review, 2009, p. 57). Furthermore, “[a]s consumers, they … have the ability to make complaints about their education provider” (Review, 2009, p. 57). Within such discourses, students as consumers (Q1), and with various
“consumer rights” (Q2), were clearly in the ascendency. This is further reinforced in the more recent *Strategy*, in which students are described as “benefit[ing] from high-quality education, supported by effective industry links and student services” (*Strategy 2025*, 2016, p. 2).

**Investors**

International education was also clearly regarded as an investment by students and their families. The *Review* pointed out that “international students make a considerable investment in their education when coming to Australia to study” (*Review*, 2009, p. 57). Furthermore, in both the earlier *Strategy* (2010) and later *Strategy 2025* (2016), students and their parents or sponsors are described as wanting to be assured that they are investing in education that will deliver career benefits and demonstrate a return on their investment (*Strategy*, 2010, p. 5; *Strategy 2025*, 2016, p. 28). International students were positioned as strategic “investors; they and their families invest in education to gain long-term benefits” (*Review*, 2009, p. 3) and as part of this bargain, “Australia will provide a rewarding experience for international students” (*Strategy 2025*, 2016, p. 13). Such an approach reveals the aims of international students as multifarious, with benefits for those with whom they come into contact in the future. Consequently, putting such investment at risk was a concern for governments (Q1) in their conception of students as investors in their own and others’ development through HE in Australia (Q2).

**Skilled workers**

Continuing these more economic concerns/“problems”, international students were also regarded as future skilled workers in the Australian labour market. After the establishment of the education-migration nexus, international students were also thought of as potential “future migrants” and potential members of the Australian workforce and community (Hamilton, 2017; Robertson, 2013). There was also a sense that these students would become successful members of the community, contributing to the skills base in Australia and diversifying the labour force in the longer term (*Strategy*, 2010, p. 5).

As Baird (the author of the *Review*) himself also pointed out, there were no concerns about students subsequently becoming Australian residents or citizens: “An intention to migrate to Australia is not the issue” (*Review*, 2009, p. 7). The policy construed students as potentially making a significant contribution to Australia as permanent residents and citizens (*Review*, 2009).

However, concerns were also expressed in relation to both international students and education providers acting as strategic opportunists in relation to residency and citizenship, resulting in students studying inappropriate courses and unlikely future job opportunities (*Review*, 2009, p. 7). The problem of students “exploiting” the system was apparent alongside more economistic concerns (Q1).
Educational and academic rationale: contributors and learners

A second key subject category relates to the positioning of international students as academic “contributors” and “learners”. In the 1990s, international students were primarily treated as contributors to Australian education. Accepting international students was one element in the internationalisation process that could contribute to the provision of high-quality education in Australia. Furthermore, this process should also “ensure that developments in international education do not disadvantage Australian students” (Report, 1992, p. 2) and “Resources for the education of Australians are not to be diverted to overseas students” (Report, 1992, p. 3). In fact, international students are ostensibly and primarily learners who travel from overseas to study in foreign countries. In this way, the silences around students as learners (Q4) that seemed apparent in later policies because of stronger economistic overtones were all the more glaring. There was still evidence of the commercialisation of international education in how students were positioned as not simply learners in their own right; international students were referred to as “consumers”, evidence of economistic framing of them alongside more learner-centred discourses.

However, there was also evidence of increasing attention given to the importance of the rights of international students, not only as consumers, but as students. Students were not simply economic units, but learners (Q5). In all four documents, the wellbeing of international students constituted an important part of the content. In support of their education, the Strategy supported projects that would help international students engage with local communities, develop partnerships with local communities and raise awareness of international students’ rights (Strategy, 2010). In the Review, mention was made that “students need somewhere to go for support and advice, referral services, information on how to engage with the community and an avenue to have their voice heard” (Review, 2009, p. 6). Meanwhile, changes were needed beyond ESOS around “student safety, access to transport concessions, accommodation and community engagement”, all of which were important because they were “key factors that contribute to a student’s overall experience in Australia” (Review, 2009, p. 5). These wellbeing issues also included student personal safety, good physical and mental health, community engagement and representation in public decision-making (Strategy, 2010), and better information (Strategy, 2010; Review, 2009). Silences around student safety within more economistic overtones (Q4) were actively broached in other parts of these policy documents and discourses—including in the context of concerns about public perceptions of international students’ safety more broadly, arising from a small number of high profile instances of students’ racial vilification and physical assault.

More economistic problem representations paid inadequate attention to international students’ wellbeing, which was expressed in the Review (2009). Indeed, Australia’s international education reputation depended on “how well we provide for the wellbeing of international students and their whole experience of studying and living in Australia” (Review, 2009, p. 7). Thus, not surprisingly in the new National Strategy for International Education 2025, the second of the nine goals is set as “delivering the best possible student experience” (Strategy 2025, 2016, p. 1).
Social rationale: strategic opportunists and residents

Generally, it was claimed that international students enrich Australian communities, and bring energy, diversity and new ways of seeing things. Many international students helped to develop “stronger international links” and contributed to “increasing the diversity of Australian society” (Strategy, 2010, p. 5). This was construed as beneficial for all involved, as it would continue to see “social and economic benefits flowing to international students, to their home countries and to Australia” (Strategy, 2010, p. 5). However, at the same time, international students were also simultaneously positioned and constructed as “strategic opportunists”. This was a reflection of the “problem” of international students as “strategic opportunists” in relation to migration issues (Q1)—even as they were positioned as potential future “residents”.

Strategic opportunists

International students were positioned as “strategic opportunists” who had made use of the system to enter and stay in Australia. Such instrumentalism is the corollary of the more economistic purposes of the student-migration pathway in migration policy (how the problem representation came about (Q3))—to bring young, Australian-educated and English-proficient international student graduates to fill specific skills shortages in Australia. Furthermore, it has also been suggested that these “opportunists” come to study in Australia just to attain Permanent Residency (PR) (Robertson, 2011). Some studies have found that many international students wish to stay permanently in Australia after graduating and that “post-study migration opportunities” are a major factor that affects the choice of international study destination (Blackmore et al., 2014; Devereaux, 2009; Hamilton, 2017). This has resulted in the growth in international students who make educational choices solely to secure PR (Devereaux, 2009). PR allows such individuals to be legitimate residents in their nation of origin and in Australia. Issues and concerns emerged as the result of the “problem” of who should be allowed to work and live in Australia, and under what circumstances (Q1).

This problematisation was evident in these policies as well. At the same time as there was attention to opportunistic providers, so too was there attention to students as opportunistic in relation to education provision (Review, 2009). This led to problematic practices amongst an array of associates and affiliates who engaged with these students (Review, 2009), which contributed to this problem “coming about” (Q3).

Some educational providers seemed to be responsive to what they construed as opportunism on the part of students by providing courses that “focus on specific occupations and, in some cases, migration outcomes” (Strategy, 2010, p. 6); the problem, in this case, is represented as “concerns that some providers and agents have put migration outcomes before a quality education for students” (Strategy, 2010, p. 7) (Q1). Students themselves were also constructed as complicit in this process, focussing their attention on “the cheapest course and working to fund their stay in Australia in order to apply for skilled migration” (Review, 2009, p. 7). However, there was also evidence of a challenge to such problematic practices, and a more
explicit focus upon provision of quality education with changes to Australia’s General Skilled Migration program ensuring “students and providers focus on a quality education experience rather than permanent migration outcomes” (Strategy, 2010, p. 6). Such alternative discursive positioning indicates how this positioning of students as exploitative can be disrupted (Q6).

Residents

Although it was uncertain if international students would become permanent residents in the future, they were undoubtedly temporary residents of local communities. For this reason, and according to the Strategy, this resulted in benefits for all involved; even as it was sometimes difficult to foster increased interactions between Australian and international students, “such involvement helps them adjust to the new society and culture, as well as providing the usual benefits of friendship” (Strategy, 2010, p. 13). In that sense, the subject category of international students as “resident” was a potential response to other discursive concerns about the “problem” of students’ dislocation and isolation. Also, enhanced engagement with local communities was construed as benefiting the education experience of international students, and reducing negative attitudes towards international students, particularly in communities with large numbers of international students (Strategy, 2010, p. 13).

Positioned as “residents”, international students could “promote social cohesion” (Strategy, 2010, p. 14), enhance Australia’s cultural richness (Review, 2009), and build on “our already unique and successful multicultural society” (Review, 2009, p. 5). These students also “provide Australians with a unique opportunity to build friendships, cultural understanding, respect and ongoing relationships” (Strategy 2025, 2016, p. 21). At the same time, they needed to be entitled to the same rights “as other temporary and permanent residents in Australia” (Review, 2009, p. 39), for example, on safety and protection (Review, 2009). In relation to challenging racism and discrimination, there was also a sense in which international students could help encourage increased cultural understanding and acceptance of cultural differences (Review, 2009, p. 40).

Even as such positioning also clearly reflects more traditional post-colonial inequities, which are not sufficiently problematised (Q4) in such problem representation, with international students construed as beneficial to the countries in which they studied (Lipura & Collins, 2020), students were construed as valuable members of the community with much to contribute in the local places in which they lived, as well as contributing to developing increased understandings of difference more broadly within (and potentially beyond) Australian society.

Political rationale: International students as ambassadors

Finally, international students were also constructed as political resources to enhance a nation’s diplomatic influence through soft power (Lomer, 2017; Wojciuk et al., 2015). In that sense, international students and alumni were represented as “ambassadors” for the destination countries in which they studied (Lomer, 2017).
If international students left Australia after they graduated, they would become an important form of “social capital” through the networks and associations they developed, and these were construed as benefitting Australia in indirect ways (Universities Australia, 2013). No matter how, they have lasting and valuable bonds and relations with Australia (Rizvi et al., 2016). Arguably, part of the “problem” being addressed in this sense is also how to manage broader geo-political tensions (Q1), [which takes on new meaning in light of more recent tensions within the Indo-Pacific region (Barrett, 2021)].

This is a conception of international student alumni as social capital: “This will continue to see social and economic benefits flowing to international students, to their home countries and to Australia” (Strategy, 2010, p. 5). Furthermore, “[t] heir high-quality life experiences in Australia contribute to our regional and global standing” (Strategy, 2010, p. 2). They (international students) “built linkages and goodwill” (Review, 2009, p. 1). And these associations are of benefit for Australians while international students reside in Australia, and are also of benefit in relation to Australia’s reputation and mutual understanding more broadly (Strategy, 2010, p. 5).

Such relations also help “strengthen Australia’s diplomatic relations” (Review, 2009, p. 5; 2025, 2016, p. 7). Specific examples were cited to reinforce the power of these relations, including at the highest levels of government (Review, 2009, p. 1). At the same time, potentially negative experiences were also construed as needing to be taken into account with such experiences seen as having problematic outcomes into the future, “Students who return to their countries with negative experiences could become poisoned alumni, conveying critical attitudes in other countries about Australian society and poor impressions about Australia’s reputation as an education provider (Review, 2009, p. 2).

Consequently, the stakes were high around the “problem” of the quality of student experience and its geo-political ramifications, even as opportunities abounded. Thus, given the importance of alumni, the 7th goal of Strategy 2025 is to build lasting connections with alumni (Strategy 2025, 2016). Meanwhile, in an effort to further engage with Australian alumni, one of the effects of such earlier representations of the problem (Q5) include the later Australia Global Alumni Engagement Strategy, which aims to strengthen the ongoing bond between alumni and Australia, maintain ongoing networking and engagement for alumni, and build sustainable cultural and economic relationships between countries (2016, p.26).

Discussion: “pivoting” towards discourses of diversity?

“Cash cows”, “consumers”, “investors” “opportunists”, “migrants”, “learners” and “ambassadors”, a variety of positionings and problem representations, categories and subject positions (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016) are all discursively evident in relation to key policies pertaining to the provision of education to international higher education students in Australia. Such perspectives do not exist in isolation, but are instead a reflection of the broader policy and political conditions within which processes of international education transpire.
The different perspectives reflect varying rationales. “Cash cows” constructs the “problem” of internationalisation of HE as one of unsustainable exploitation of the pursuit of economic benefits provided by students, and ignores their wellbeing and interests (Q1). “opportunists” reflects negative perceptions about international students who are positioned as problematic for “taking advantage of the system”, and within which the direct economic benefits and students’ interests are not considered/silenced (Q4). “Consumers” and “investors” position international students in the free market who pay to receive and benefit from a quality education “service”; the problem then becomes one of an economic discourse of “satisfying” customers. Finally, key policies also characterise students’ interests in relation to their fair treatment as “learners” and “future migrants” and ultimately, potential future long-term members of the Australian community; the problem of exploitation again is more evident in such construals. This latter positioning reflects more social and cultural influences, and something of a challenge (Q6) to the silencing of such concerns (Q4) when more economic prerogatives seem ascendent, even as this is often limited in nature. In this positioning, international students are valued as persons and not simply cultivated to be knowledgeable and skilful persons for economic prerogatives alone. In a sense, more traditional deficit and economistic discourses are challenged by such alternatives, even as more exploitative relations continue to be evident (Lipura & Collins, 2020).

While the consumer protection regime (Sawir et al., 2009) was clearly evident, at the same time, we also noticed changes in discourses—shifting to a more quasi-citizenship tradition, in which each international student is positioned as a “self-determining, rights-bearing subject with normal access to the same protections and entitlements as domestic students” (Sawir et al., 2009, p. 46), and a person with all the entitlements of a migrant, a worker and a human being (Deumert et al., 2005).

The policies foregrounded here are important because they provide evidence of at least some shifts in policies of the time, whereby more and more attention had come to be attached to the wellbeing and welfare of international students, including students’ sense of “becoming” (Tran, 2016), and not simply for what they could contribute to the coffers of cash-strapped Australian universities. The “problem” of economistic concerns about how to maintain international student enrolments simply for economic reasons (Q1) was challenged, disrupted by more humanistic concerns for students as persons (Q6). Positive study experiences, safety and quality accommodation, transport concessions, community and global engagement were all increasingly emphasised in ways that were not the case in earlier policy moments. Such discursive work reveals a shift towards a more holistic sense of the student experience, even as this experience was, and is, still clearly heavily influenced by more economistic and exploitative logics. The “problems” at play are multifarious, sometimes openly contested, and always in tension with one another.

Almost two decades ago, Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) flagged the push–pull factors influencing international student choice of destination, and pointed out that attention needed to be paid to the reduction of push factors with the improvement of the standing of Asian universities and educational systems. There are now more and more Asian universities (particularly Chinese universities) appearing in the top 500 world university rankings, which are attracting more and more overseas students.
to the Asian region and encouraging local students to take higher degrees at home. Under such conditions, pull factors, like high-quality provision, good reputation, and famous alumni, are increasingly depended upon by popular countries to continuously attract substantial numbers of international students (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). And given the recent COVID-19 circumstances, and recognition at the federal government level that international HE is an important part of the Australian economy (DESE, 2021), the “problem” of competition within an increasingly “crowded” educational market reveals how economistic discourses continue to exert influence and are never far below the surface.

Nevertheless, international students’ wellbeing emphasised in these documents also acts as an important pull factor, attracting more overseas students. Supporting the interests of students, caring about “student safety”, focussing upon “access to transport concessions” and “accommodation and community engagement” (Baird, 2009) all reflected attention to students’ needs. Similarly, the Strategy and later Strategy 2025 mentioned improving student wellbeing, ensuring the quality of education, strengthening consumer protection for international students and providing better information to current and future students.

**Conclusion: implications for Australian international education**

There is no doubt that international education is an important part of the Australian economy, a point brought home most recently by the effects of the COVID-19 crisis upon the international student movement. The development of the new Australian Strategy for International Education 2021–2030 expressed this point (DESE, 2021). In a rapidly changing international environment, the problem of competition in the international education market (Q1) has become more and more fierce. How to foster and maintain the sustainable development of international education in Australia is a key topic within policies more generally in the Australian context, and particularly in relation to international education. However, “[i]nternational students are not just economic units but complex people. No industry or educational enterprise will survive if it neglects the concerns of those it serves” (Sawir et al., 2009, p. 46). The “problem” can be thought differently (Q4). Multiple drivers affect students’ choices of overseas destination for study, including education quality, tuition fees and living costs, international students’ rights and wellbeing, and future migration pathways and policy (cf., Gribble & Blackmore, 2012; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Woodfield, 2012), and cannot simply be silences (Q4). Thus, these factors need to be further considered in relation to policymaking. As Marginson (2012) and Ramia et al. (2013) argued, generally international students’ rights are not adequately covered by host governments, including in Australia and New Zealand and these “rights” discourses can serve as important vehicles for disrupting more economistic logics (Q6).

The results of migration policy changes also show that international students are sensitive to the student-migrant pathway and their choices and preferences change due to changes in migration and PR policy (Knight, 2011; Spinks & Koleth, 2016). This diversity of factors also needs to be acknowledged and recognised more explicitly.
At the same time, however, the research reveals, at least in part, a more caring disposition on the part of those seeking to rearticulate the educational experience for international students. The social, political and cultural sustainability of international education development demands increased attention to international students’ wellbeing, and this is a key focus of attention within these policies and challenge to more economistic representation of the “problem” (Q6). The “pivot” here is not just in relation to a more diverse array of discourses, or economistic concerns above all others, but also reflects increased concerns about the wellbeing of international students as learners and for their own intrinsic worth as people—reflecting a “discourse of diversity”—a valuing of people whose diversity is their strength.

Again, this reflects a necessary alternative analysis to more economistic and deficit-oriented discourses and better reflects the actual hybridity that characterises the international student sector more broadly (Lipura & Collins, 2020). This valuing of diversity is reflected in the pressing need to pay much more attention to the experiences of international students, and to ensure they are not treated merely as “Cash cows” or regarded as simply consumers of education (Strategy, 2010). Even as there has been something of a broader “pivot” towards Asia for arguably ostensibly economic reasons, we would argue there has also been something of a pivot away from solely economic prerogatives in the international education space, and towards more holistic concerns—discourses of diversity, alongside a diversity of discourses. Perhaps international education is something of a “bellwether” for how Australia needs to engage in its relations with its international neighbours, partners and colleagues. Changing global geopolitics are also a significant factor here, including the global rise of China. This entails fostering positive relations beyond simply an ethos of economic instrumentalism, or a transactional socio-politics, and towards a more genuinely sensitive and sensible engagement for enhanced social, political and cultural respect and cohesion; such discourses are no longer simply silenced by broader economic logics (Q4). We would argue the four policies presented here were central moves towards such a pivot.

Nevertheless, and at the same time, the COVID-19 situation has revealed that this pivot towards more inclusive, responsive and respectful relations is far from complete. The Australian government has been roundly criticised for providing inadequate support for international students during the pandemic ((Nguyen & Balakrishnan, 2020), and rightly so. Indeed, the federal government has neglected universities during the pandemic, with substantive, detrimental material effects upon many international students. And these policy settings all occur within a broader context in which racism towards international students (e.g. towards Indian students in 2009, and more recently towards Asian students during the pandemic) has been a contentious issue. Such facts constitute problematic attitudes towards international students which inform the realpolitik of international student relations in Australia, and point to the gaps between policy and practice, even as efforts are simultaneously in play to address such concerns in more substantive ways.

Our analysis reveals a need to focus much greater attention upon issues of quality for international students in education delivery, as well as ensuring students’ wellbeing and rights. A “what’s the problem represented to be?” approach enables such questioning, pointing towards key tensions between multifarious
problem representations. There is no doubt that in recent years, there is evidence of policy and political concerns about international students’ experiences and rights (Ramia, 2017), and the key policies, and the ways they “problematis[e]” international HE, reveal efforts to take stock of the nature of international education in Australia over time. However, policymakers need to take the concerns raised in these policies into account much more explicitly, and seek to foreground some of the broader social, political and cultural concerns raised at the core of considerations about the international education experience (an experience which is not simply a “market” or a one-sided, exploitative process). More policy effort needs to be oriented towards fostering the sorts of supportive, culturally, socially, and politically reciprocal processes of engagement between Australia and international students that are made possible through the presence of international students in the Australian education landscape, and that serve to challenge more dominant economic narratives, and the challenging fiscal circumstances in the HE sector that have enabled such circumstances (Q3).

A diverse set of discourses is evident within the policy and political debates, just as respect for diversity—a discourse of diversity—in and of itself needs to be further encouraged. The importance of such relations is heightened, given that many of these same international students-of-today will become the Australian citizens-of-tomorrow or ambassadors for Australia. Policy settings that treat international students as not simply students-from-abroad who are studying in Australia for a finite period, but as active members of Australian society—now and into the future—challenge more economistic parameters, and help foster the sorts of social, political, cultural engagement—respect for diversity—that will ensure genuine Australian, regional and global sustainability into the future. Understanding of these matters will be central to rebuilding international student numbers in Australian universities after the pandemic.

Of course, one could argue that these shifts in foci are simply a reflection of how countries such as Australia, which have something of the “first mover” advantage in the internationalisation of higher education, are simply able to identify developing problems, and respond, shoring up their dominance in the seemingly lucrative education “industry”. Karram (2013) pointed out there exists “power struggles between markets and humans”, which means there are distinct discourses about international students, including constructions of students’ experiences “that affirm international students as vulnerable populations” in the four leading, Anglophone destination countries of Australia, Britain, Canada and the United States (p. 10). Thus, the findings presented here have implications for other national contexts, in which international students contribute to the economic viability of higher education, and in which internationalisation of education in universities has the capacity to foster enhanced cross-cultural understanding for geo-political stability and peace.

**Funding** Funding was provided by Humanities and Social Sciences Research Youth Foundation of Ministry of Education of China (Project Name: Key elements and promotion strategies of Study in China brand construction: from the perspective of consumers; Grant No. 21YJC880027) and General Project of Educational Science Planning in Hubei Province, China (Grant No. 2021GB002).
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