

Conclusion

Policy discourses on international students have been dominated by rationales for or against international student recruitment. In essence, international students are discursively framed as desirable to the extent that they benefit the UK, solving key policy problems, which they are seen to do educationally, economically and politically. However, the debate on immigration problematises students as migrants, creating a barrier to their presence by framing them as less desirable for the UK. The three rationales in favour of recruitment have proved to be quite stable over changes in government, although shifts in emphasis have revealed discursive differences. Firstly, while international students are considered to enhance the UK's influence, this was conceived of in terms of public diplomacy under the PMI, and in terms of soft power under the Coalition IES. Secondly, while reputation was an important rationale through the period, the PMI sought to materially alter student experiences to generate satisfaction, whereas the Coalition IES relies exclusively on branding to do so. Thirdly, the economic rationale intensifies and comes to predominate under the Coalition IES, such that all engagement in international education is fundamentally justified in economic terms, whereas, under the PMI, other rationales were also important. Finally, immigration came to be seen as a counter-rationale under the Coalition Government, whereas under New Labour it was also seen as a positive incentive to engage in international student recruitment. These rationales have shaped the discursive representations of students.

HOW HAVE STUDENTS BEEN REPRESENTED?

Throughout the latter half of this book, representations of international students constructed through policy rationales have been exposed. I will now pull these together.

International students are seen as migrants. They are defined by their border-crossing and their nationality, in contrast to the supposed norm of students who study within the country of their birth and nationality. Incidentally, citizenship and residency are assumed to “naturally” coincide; a normal person is seen to reside permanently in the country of their nationality. In the UK, international students can be seen either as legitimate migrants and “genuine students” or as “bogus”. This is defined primarily with reference to their paid employment. A genuine student’s principal concern is their study, and work should be only an afterthought in their experience. A bogus student, on the other hand, needs or wants to work a substantial number of hours, in addition to or instead of devoting the majority of their attention to their education. They are therefore seen to be abusing or exploiting the system. Genuine students can also be seen as desirable migrants, to the extent that they possess skills in demand in the workforce. After graduation, highly skilled students, or those with enough money to invest in entrepreneurship, become sought-after migrants—for a limited time. They are not seen as desirable permanent immigrants, or as entitled to work as part of their education. They are instead classified by the degree of risk (security and economic) they are seen to pose, categorised on the basis of their nationality and the education provider they are enrolled with, and become increasingly subject to surveillance. At the heart of these discourses is an understanding of human capacity as subject to points-based evaluation, subordinating individuality to the driver of the knowledge economy.

Second, international students are seen as consumers of international education as a product. Marketing and branding attract them to a country and its education, building meanings for international education. As consumers, students purchase a set of services, and an experience. Their satisfaction generates perceptions of quality. They are encouraged to take action as consumers, through complaints, customer satisfaction surveys, and exerting demands on the strength of their payments. Students are seen to make rational decisions based on a construct of human capital, investing in their future employability. Yet they are also seen as fundamentally passive. Finally, as satisfied consumers, they are also seen as a

marketing resource, as brand ambassadors who help to promote the UK through word of mouth, valued for their capacity to generate reputational capital.

Third, international students are seen as a means to make money, economic resources, measured in volume. Their presence is attributed to the successful branding and marketing of the UK higher education sector overseas. They are vectors of direct income, part of an education export industry, within which competition drives intrinsically beneficial growth, generating income for the country. Through their fees, accommodation and associated spending, the UK acquires a relative competitive advantage. When justifying their presence, international students are almost invariably referred to as “bringing in money”. This is seen to benefit institutions, local communities and regions, and above all the country. Their presence is valued to the extent that they benefit the UK, and the responsibilities of the UK to international students are not significant.

Fourth, international students are seen as educational resources. Their presence in British classrooms makes them intercultural spaces, creating opportunities for home students to acquire skills and knowledge necessary for employment in the globalised workforce. International students’ knowledge of their home countries and cultures means they can act as resources, as windows on the world for immobile home students and each other. Read through a culturalist lens which ascribes behaviour and deficit to national origins, international students are passive vectors of globalised knowledge whose mere presence is adequate to enhance quality. They contribute to internationalisation at home, and facilitate the introduction of an international curriculum. The implication of this representation is that they are expected to be knowledgeable regarding the subject they have come to study in application to their home country and prepared and confident in sharing this knowledge. While this is often presented as an inclusive and empowering model, acknowledging students’ prior experiences and understanding, it could be experienced differently by students.

Fifth, international students are seen as in deficit. Where they struggle with or resist the role of educational resource, or other dimensions of the student role, they are represented to be in linguistic or academic deficit. Expectations of international students which the institution cannot meet are represented to be unrealistic. Students are constructed as “dependent” or “needy”, and made responsible for their needs. Students are expected to adapt to the institution and the UK, rather than the

reverse. Although there is much discussion of “support”, this often takes the form of visa advice, counselling, and remedial skills support, rather than academic aid. Students’ deficit is often associated with their culture and nationality, implying a cultural deficit for which a British higher education is the remedy. Thus, national culture is seen as both a resource as above, and a liability.

Sixth, international students are seen as ambassadors for the UK. The global diplomacy narrative represents students as influential, elite, understanding of “British values” and sympathetic to them. They are imagined to be converted during their stay to “British values”, particularly a (notional) liberal democratic ideology, and to develop a political affinity for the country, its people, institutions and products. These relationships are represented as generating soft power for the UK, increasing its influence through a network of alumni ambassadors overseas. Such students are also seen to be future leaders of their country, invested in its political and economic development and engaging in international higher education in order to progress their country. Therefore, they are seen to be likely to hold positions of influence in the future, which they can exert in favour of the UK, in tribute to the positive experiences and lasting relationships they built here. The alumni ambassador is premised on a model of the “elite” student, often a major scholarship holder.

These representations overlap, mutually reinforce each other, and contradict each other. However, they are all premised on certain commonalities. Firstly, all these representations present students as passive. Their views, opinions, political ideologies, experiences and future trajectories are seen as malleable, capable of being influenced and changed by institutions or national policy. There is little sense in the policy discourse that students may have fiercely held political, personal or religious beliefs, or influential previous experiences, which will not change and may influence the meanings they ascribe to their experiences of the UK. Nor is there a sense that they may be conscious and aware of these endeavours and may selectively, knowingly, decide which to engage with and which to resist, or pay lip service to. There is an assumption that profound transformative identity shifts occur for all students in predictable patterns, despite abundant evidence that such shifts are highly individual, locally situated, and socially mediated. Secondly, these representations are premised on a homogenous model of who international students are, allowing quantification. When students are discussed as educational resources, or ambassadors, or in academic deficit, there is rarely a differentiation between

students. Where differentiation does occur, it is typically on a national or regional, characterising “East Asian students” or “Arabic students”, as if a middle-class male agnostic student from an elite private school in Seoul is equivalent to a Christian public school female student from a modest family background in Guangzhou—or indeed as if any two people can ever be said to have the same experience or interpretations. Explanations of student behaviour or dissatisfaction are sought in quantifiable demographic characteristics, rather than in individuality, agency or experiential dimensions.

HOW HAS INTERNATIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION BEEN REPRESENTED?

Policy rationales also discursively construct multiple intersecting representations of international higher education.

The first and most dominant representation is a marketised vision of international higher education. Globally, higher education is seen as a marketplace, where providers compete for student-consumers through marketing and branding. The ultimate aim is seen to be economic success. Higher education is also seen as a product, as something that can be brought, sold and possessed by individuals, in the form of educational capital. It is manifested and signified by the qualification. Yet this product is also seen as comprising a set of services: teaching, access to resources, skills training, and support. It is also represented as an experience, akin to tourism or leisure, where the provider is responsible for what the consumer experiences. “The student experience” is a commodity itself. Marketisation produces multiple understandings of international higher education: as a marketplace, a commodity, a product and set of services.

The second representation is of international higher education as a national industry for export. In this representation, higher education is equated with manufacturing and service industries, competitive in a global marketplace. From the perspective of state policy, industries help to maintain national advantage, by enhancing economic status and global reputation. In this model, global growth is not seen to advantage the UK unless a disproportionate share of the market can be acquired. Higher education is seen as an industry where the UK has a traditional, historical advantage and therefore significant gains can be made. It also confers prestige, generating political advantage. International higher education is

seen as both the sign of political influence (in that it is capable of attracting students) and as the generator thereof (in that their future actions increase political influence). The imperialist origins of this advantage are not seen as problematic.

International higher education is also seen as a safe, controllable intercultural contact zone. The need for intercultural interaction and fluency is acknowledged; however, it may also be seen as a risk. Recent debates around radicalisation, for example, suggest that there may be political concerns about the unpredictable consequences of intercultural contact. In international higher education, however, intercultural contact has a clear instrumental agenda: to increase employability in global labour markets. Classroom conversations can be steered by staff, are purposeful in their curricular links, and other events in the university have predictably anodyne intentions. Student union field trips to popular cultural attractions, for example, foster the touristic experiential narrative. International higher education is not seen as a political space, raising critical awareness of global injustices.

As such, international higher education is seen as an opportunity for the cheap global education of home students, enhancing their employability and integration within a globalised labour market. With relatively low rates of outward mobility of British students, there is a policy concern that the UK may lose its labour market advantage if its graduates are not equipped to work in global businesses or abroad. Internationalisation of the curriculum is seen as the solution, but this is a major, resource intensive project, which does not provide the interpersonal contact required to make bone-deep change. Relying on international students' presence in classrooms as educational resources, however, offers institutions the opportunity to avoid cost-heavy curricular redesign.

Finally, international higher education is seen as a route for migration. It is seen as both a way to attract desired migrants, and as a veil for undesired migrants to obscure their "true" intentions. Institutions as sponsors are positioned as the primary beneficiary, who therefore demands increased migration. They are implicated in the enforcement of migration regulations, and held accountable for infringements. The state has the authority to regulate the demands for students made by institutions, and the responsibility to control migration in international higher education.

WHAT HAS CHANGED?

Policy discourses on international students represent them in complex, interwoven, plural ways. They have changed since 1999, but not in strict association with changes in political parties in control. Overall, there has been more continuity than change. Both Coalition and Labour administrations have valued and rationalised the recruitment of international students to the extent that they benefit the UK, framing them as solutions to policy problems. This is a reasonable endeavour for national policy, but privileges the interests of already powerful entities (the UK higher education sector, its institutions and the British state) over less powerful, potentially marginalised individuals far from home. Both Coalition and Labour administrations have sought the income from international students, the reputational gain earned by virtue of their presence, the potential benefits to higher education for home students, and the hope of increased political influence. In the discourse of the Coalition Government, the idea that international graduates might fill domestic labour market skills gaps has largely been dropped, and the negative perception of excessive immigration has instead become dominant. Both Coalition and Labour governments, however, adopted a discourse of exclusiveness and selectivity in attempting to attract the “best and the brightest” students. They took different actions to achieve this, the Coalition Government opting to rule out certain students who did not meet threshold standards, and the Labour Governments seeking to attract and reward desired students. There is more attention paid under Labour Governments, particularly in secondary policy documents, to the actual education and classroom experience than is apparent under the Coalition Government.

At the heart of these representations, however, is a key binary categorisation: international students are “othered”, defined by their difference, by the adjective “international” which says they deviate from the presumed norm of “home” students. Even narratives which seek to value this difference entrench and replicate it by the discursive reinforcement of accepted social categorisations. In other words, every time we accept that something meaningful can be said about “international students” as a group, we perpetuate the conceptual marginalisation of a social group.

Even critiques which seek to empower the very group they discuss, by identifying them as a group reproduce the division—including this book.

Yet policy critiques need to be part of the discourses which they critique, because understanding discourses as socially constructed requires participating in them. That means using the discursive formations, even while dismantling them. There is no way out of the discourse, no way to stand outside it. Because UK policy talks about and defines international students as a meaningful category, this book has also done so. But, I have not taken “international students” themselves as my subjects. Instead I have taken their discursive representation as my subject and sought to critique it through a problematisation framework.

This book has contributed to the emerging field of research on international student policy and by extension to international HE, by mapping its iterations in the UK, establishing what has happened, what has been said, what has changed and what has stayed consistent. It has also linked education policy to migration policy. This study builds on the work of Humfrey (2011), Geddie (2014), Walker (2014) by taking a critical approach to representations of international students in policy, a new approach for the UK. These findings extend similar approaches taken by research from Australia into new geographical territory. It has also made methodological contributions. It demonstrates that Bacchi’s framework of questions can usefully be applied to UK HE policy, and this work is one of the first to adopt this approach. The results also show that systematic approaches to inductive text analysis can be facilitated through software, as this is one of the few studies to employ CAQDAS in policy text analysis in UK higher education.

WHAT ARE THE ALTERNATIVES?

I have sustained an attempt at grammatical objectivity throughout this book, which I have dropped for the purposes of this conclusion. I identify myself as an international student, not in a facile “we are all international” motto, but as an intrinsic part of my life history. I spent the majority of my childhood in Indonesia and Benin, and all of my adolescence in the USA. In every new education system, I became the “international student”. I spent a year in France on a study abroad programme, using my second nationality, and operating in what I perceive as my second culture; again as the international student. On returning to the UK as a postgraduate, I imagined myself coming back to my “home system”, but I was classified as “international” on the basis of my residency, and my lack of knowledge about the higher education system

suggested that I was indeed a stranger at home. Yet I am white in ethnicity, British in (first) nationality, and a native English speaker. In writing on international students I have therefore frequently been alienated by the discourse: firstly, I have been categorised as “international” by virtue of my residency, a categorisation I resisted as I identified as British and English. Secondly, when the discourse on “international students” has so clearly constructed a racialised, nationalised Other, I found no place for myself there. I later taught students with similar stories: a British student of Nigerian origin educated in Saudi Arabia, classified as international; and a Hong Kong student with a British passport who completed secondary school in the UK, still classified as international. They are caught in a system which represents them as a homogenous entity. So are their colleagues. So when I talk about “us”, I mean all those who have been categorised, in one form or another, as “international students”.

Firstly, we can be seen as having hybrid, fluid, multiple identities rather than fixed or nascent identities (Madge et al. 2014). International education can be seen as a multi-sited and multi-scalar transnational social field (Gargano 2009), where there is a continuum of mobility rather than a dichotomy (King and Raghuram 2013). Students can be seen as grounded in multiple social spaces, geographically situated and socially mediated, where meanings are ascribed by individuals (Gargano 2009). We can be seen as agents in the creation and maintenance of our own identity(ies). We can be seen as embodied individuals, where gender, ethnicity, age, and sexuality mediate experience and create meanings (Sin 2009; Holloway et al. 2012). Students can be seen as “workers, political activists, or family members” (Raghuram 2013, p. 141), as well as students. We are socially connected in friendship and kinship networks which may be with other international students, with host country nationals, and with family and friends overseas. One student was a mature Chinese student from a rural province, of minority ethnic origin whose native language was the regional dialect, not Mandarin. In a class of 18-year-old privileged Mandarin speakers, she talked openly about how isolated she felt. Her closest friend became a Saudi Arabian mother of three; they had more in common than she had with the rest of the class. I saw similar friendships emerge between Singaporean and Colombian students, bonded by their work ethic and high achievement. Most students are at various times more or less stressed, anxious and lonely. This can be understood as intrinsic to the condition of international higher education, implying distance, strangeness and constant

change, rather than as an individual deficit. “The international student experience” is a notional, arbitrary collective, unlikely to lead to the predictable development of a cosmopolitan identity. Indeed, students may adopt an instrumental approach to acquiring the trappings of cosmopolitanism, as a tool for social advantage rather than transformative personal change. All of these possibilities coexist in plural, fragmented forms, made whole only by the individual.

International students can be seen as possessing varying degrees of intersecting capitals: social, economic, educational, and cultural. Many may belong to a socio-economic elite, at least to upper middle classes, but others may be financially insecure (Choudaha and de Wit 2014) or from rural, working class backgrounds (Sin 2009). While we may be personally ambitious, looking for respect, status and wealth, others may be fulfilling a parental ambition, sacrificing our own interests or passions out of filial duty (Sin 2009). Equally, this ambition may not be a choice: we are often caught in an opportunity trap, paying heavy personal costs to realise opportunities in an intensely competitive workforce (Brown 2003). Such aspirations could be argued to reflect an internalisation of economic representations, where we measure our worth in financial contributions and wealth. Ambition may of course not be purely economic; it may be for relative status, or a particular occupation, or the realisation of an entrepreneurial plan. It may simply be to learn. For some of us, ambition plays little role in our desire for international higher education, and we are motivated instead by personal reasons and a desire for different experiences (Choudaha and de Wit 2014). For many of us, international higher education is a continuation in globally mobile lives (Madge et al. 2014), and is a natural extension rather than a major decision. It may be seen as a route to permanent migration (King and Raghuram 2013), or as temporary (Gargano 2009). Migration intentions can change over the course of an international education, as friendships, marriages, and careers develop (Raghuram 2013). For some, international higher education is a way to pursue elite higher education (Brooks and Waters 2011). For others, it is the last resort after exclusion from domestic higher education. For still others, it may be the only option to pursue a particular subject or course. Others may seek the cultural capital from an extended stay overseas. The complex interactions of different forms of capital mediate both access to international higher education, experiences within it, and trajectories after.

The marketisation narrative positions students as economic beings, rather than political. Where our political views are mentioned, we are assumed to be easily influenced, to change our ideologies as a result of cultural adaptation and intercultural learning. Instead, international students can be seen as having stable political orientations and opinions, which define their engagement in international education, rather than being defined by it. They can be seen as patriotic, committed to the interests of their own country (Holloway et al. 2012), positioning themselves as ambassadors *to* the UK, rather than from it. Rather than acquiring liberal democratic values, many of us are already committed to them. We can also be apolitical, disengaged entirely from the political process. International higher education could be seen as a site for reciprocal influence and exchange, rather than uni-directional.

Above all, we could be represented as agents, in control of our futures, our migrations, and our education. Instead of educational resources to be exploited, we could be seen to be in a necessary engagement in intellectual production, with a right to critique as full partners (Madge et al. 2014). International students could be seen as knowledge creators and generators, co-creating resources as active agents in learning and education (Naidoo et al. 2011). This would imply a full and radical commitment to a critical pedagogy (Buckley 2014), alert to and explicit about post-colonial mentalities and power relationships (Sin 2009). International higher education could be seen as an endeavour based on care, responsibility and relationships, rather than transactions (Madge et al. 2009).

Finally, we could be seen as temporary citizens with a full suite of political and democratic rights (Marginson et al. 2010), with long-term vested interests and therefore a political voice in the country where we study. Instead of being endowed with a limited range of rights by virtue of our economic contribution, international students could be seen as possessing a full range of freedoms—to learn, work, study, love, migrate—by virtue of universal human rights.

Instead of representing international higher education as a marketplace, or a resource for competitive national advantage, it could be seen as a global public good, rather than a private good (Marginson 2016). On a national level, higher education is seen to be a public good where there are cultural, social and economic benefits which result from a higher overall level of education. If these benefits are seen on a global scale, then it can be considered a global public good. In this representation, a user-pays

model may not be seen to be appropriate if the benefits are understood to be felt beyond in the individual. Similarly, the way in which education is marketed to the individual student might change, communicating instead with families, communities and international networks. Finally, the way that universities structure their curricula would change, moving beyond a narrow individualistic focus on graduate outcomes and attributes towards a broader understanding of students as socially networked with the potential to create positive social change as a result of their education.

WHERE NEXT?

This book has addressed a number of questions which still merit further scrutiny opening up avenues for more research in the future. From a global policy mobility perspective, it could form the basis for establishing relationships between changes in international student policy across a range of countries and build on work on exploring how policies travel (Geddie 2014). For example, it is apparent that the PBS migration system was largely borrowed from Australia; similarly, the British Council branding initiative appears to have been imitated by Canada. Policy seems to travel bilaterally and unsystematically.

Narrowing down into the UK, this study could move out from discourses in texts and into discourses in life, the extent to which the representations from policy impact the way that international students represent themselves, and see themselves represented. It could also examine the way that higher education professionals represent international students, how they are refracted in institutional discourses.

Moving away from public policy discourses, accessing policy actors, ex or current, could explore (albeit partially and retrospectively) informal discursive representations. An alternative window on public discourses would be to examine the media representations of international students, as Philo et al. (2013) did with refugees. A genre-focused study could, using this corpus, examine the chains of reproduction wherein a single document can be reinterpreted and recycled in different forms: from research report to policy, to speech, to press release, for example. A critical discourse analysis could sample equivalent genres from this diverse corpus such as speeches and conduct a linguistic analysis on the representations to further substantiate the inferences made here.

SO WHAT NOW?

The findings of this research offer the HE sector in the UK, and elsewhere, an enhanced critical awareness of these discursive representations in policy, and the extent to which they may influence institutional, disciplinary and individual decision-making, styles of talking and ways of being. Discourses have the power to define and limit the ways that we live our lives and think about ourselves, so they can profoundly influence academic, institutional, and students' identities and lived experiences. The danger in having such a substantial gap in the literature on this subject is that sector actors may be unaware of the ways in which they unconsciously reproduce and act out discursive representations with which they may be philosophically deeply at odds. I do not advocate an alternative set of representations because students are individuals, and as such as varied, unpredictable, and changeable, neither universally "weak and vulnerable" or "strong and resilient". Any attempt to construct alternative representations would generate its own disciplinary effects, disempowering students as agents in new, creative and subtle ways.

For policy, this study offers a reason to think differently about international students in UK HE. Firstly, the competitive zero-sum model of the market is profoundly damaging to global equality, development and in the long run, stability. Increasing market-share deprives another country of its piece of a finite pie. It also means perpetuating extant inequalities—by seeking out people who are already potential higher education students of one country or another and offering them additional advantages, it creates a class of hyper-educated people while others lack access to basic primary education. By then further expecting that those people will go home after they finish studying, the current policy is creating its own demise. Effectively, current international HE recruitment sends home a group of well-educated, privileged people with all the tools to set up domestic higher education in the UK's model. Just as the UK once sold guns, before selling the industrial technology to manufacture them, the country and the HE sector are now selling the intellectual technology to make higher education. We are creating our own competitors—if we are doing our jobs well. A lasting international HE sector, therefore, needs different rationales to lead to different representations of students.

It is essential for academic researchers as beneficiaries of the IHE system to acknowledge the discursive power of policy over international

students. Because national policy often sets the terms of public discourse, its representations of international students may be having significant unexplored consequences, perpetuated by the academy. Silence on post-colonial implications of othering students by their country of citizenship or residence and their culture represents compliance. Reproduction of consumer and deficit models of students are already part of students' self-subjectification. Cooperation in a diplomatic narrative implies a primacy to British foreign policy objectives. It is the ethical responsibility for those of us who participate in IHE to critically examine how the policy represents students, and if necessary, to resist and disrupt it. This is a necessary precursor to the emancipatory, caring, critical, empowering pedagogy to which most institutions and academics are dedicated.

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