

Contesting Notions of an ‘Education Industry’: Media Commentary on the Transition to a Trade- Orientated International Student Program in Australia

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Abstract

In 1985, the Australian government instituted major changes to its international student policy. These changes signalled a shift in International Student Program intent from an emphasis on international enrolments as a form of humanitarianism – the main focus of the Program since its inception in 1950 – to a trade-orientated approach in which international student fees represented an important source of revenue for tertiary institutions. Whilst this paradigmatic shift in the conceptualisation of international student enrolments is well documented, the manner in which this transition to a market-oriented Program is represented in the media of the time has attracted less scholarly attention. This paper reports on research that examines Australian newspaper coverage of the International Student Program and its transition to a trade-orientated model during the 1980s and into the 1990s and early 2000s. Importantly, it identifies two discursive constructions of the international student population that co-exist within the textual corpus, expressing contrasting views about the nature and purpose of education.

This paper has been peer reviewed

The Origins of the International Student Program

An official program for the coordinated intake of international students was established in 1950 with Australia's involvement in the Colombo Plan, a Commonwealth scheme to improve the economic conditions of post-colonial Asia.¹ As part of the Colombo Plan, Asian students travelled to Australia to pursue tertiary qualifications in order to contribute to the task of economic development in their home countries. Along with students sponsored under the Colombo Plan and other scholarship programs, private students enrolled at tertiary institutions throughout Australia. As Waldron comments, it was essential for the government to allow the entry of private students, as the limited finances of the scholarship scheme rendered it impossible for Australia to provide sponsored places for each applicant.² These private students received an education subsidy from the Australian government but financed their own entry, departure and living expenses.³

The International Student Program's origins in the Colombo Plan meant that it was generally considered a form of aid in the first decades of Program operation⁴ and strong evidence of this humanitarian interpretation exists in the Australian print media coverage of the 1950s and 1960s.⁵ In reality, it is estimated that most international students of this time were financed partially or entirely through private means.⁶ Nevertheless, media accounts of the International Student Program in the mid-twentieth century emphasised Australia's financial contributions with little acknowledgement of student expenditure. A 1945 report in *The Advertiser* typifies this mentality, relaying the comments of the General Secretary of the National Union of Australian Students: 'The admission of foreign students would not detrimentally affect

the economic position of Australia, because their numbers would be small compared with the population of the Commonwealth.’⁷

Waldron⁸ reports that the first Program Interdepartmental Conference in 1950 held by the Department of Immigration to determine the administrative structures for the International Student Program discussed the task of promoting Australia as a study destination. Among the matters to be addressed at the conference was the composition of a promotional booklet advertising Australian schools and universities. A Melbourne University academic reportedly asserted the primary importance of academic qualifications in the selection criteria for international students and signalled The University of Melbourne’s desire to pursue such students as ‘clients’. Interestingly, this intention to promote Australian education attracts little media coverage in national newspapers of the time.

Waldron⁹ further advises that, following the 1951 Registrars’ Conference, additional Australian universities expressed interest in advertising courses in Asia and by 1953 formally set out their respective entrance requirements. This consideration of the commercial potential of Australian higher education – whilst not clearly visible in the print media of the time – could be seen to represent the beginnings of the conceptualisation of the International Student Program as a ‘product’¹⁰ in what was to become a ‘major export earner’¹¹ for Australia some thirty years later.

The Transition from ‘Aid to Trade’¹²

In 1983, the Australian government commissioned a formal review of the International Student Program.¹³ The Goldring committee was established to evaluate private international

student intake, whilst the Jackson committee was charged with the task of reviewing the aid-related side of the Program. In 1984, these two committees released their recommendations, providing contrasting advice for the future of the Australian International Student Program. The Jackson committee advocated the move to a deregulated 'higher education industry', with unlimited full-fee paying university places for international students.¹⁴ In this model the humanitarian aspect of the Program would be fulfilled via scholarship funds. In contrast, the Goldring committee recommended the continuation of the existing subsidised education model and concluded that the introduction of a full-fee paying system would be detrimental to students from financially disadvantaged backgrounds.¹⁵

Ultimately, the Jackson committee's recommendations were adopted and the Australian government moved to embrace the commercial potential of international enrolments.¹⁶ In 1991, a report issued by the Australian Department of Employment, Education and Training stated of the decision: 'In the light of significant external economic changes and changes in the policy and administrative environment, Australia could no longer see itself so much as a donor of education and training services to developing countries, a benefactor, but more as a partner where mutual benefits for individuals and countries is the desired outcome.'¹⁷

This transition from an emphasis mainly on humanitarian considerations to a trade-oriented model resulted in a reduction in the number of subsidised and sponsored international students and Australian educational institutions were encouraged to actively recruit full-fee paying scholars.¹⁸ Whilst the government continued to provide international scholarships through

mechanisms such as the Australian International Development Assistance Bureau, the income provided by full-fee paying international students became increasingly important in the post-1985 era.¹⁹ Within the context of the global recession, the move toward the privatisation of the public sector,²⁰ and decreasing government expenditure on education, revenue provided by international student fees became essential for the survival of Australian tertiary institutions.²¹

Throughout the late 1980s there was a notable increase in the number of international students at the tertiary level, especially in private English language colleges.²² In 1987, the number of full-fee paying international students attending Australian tertiary institutions was estimated to be 622.²³ This number had increased to 6784 in 1989.²⁴ According to Marginson, the Australian institutions with the highest proportions of international students in 1988 were The University of New South Wales, Monash University, Curtin University of Technology and The University of Melbourne.²⁵ The major source countries for international students during the 1987-1989 period were Hong Kong, Singapore, Indonesia and Malaysia, with students from China representing a large proportion of enrolments in the non-formal sector.²⁶ By 1991, the number of international student enrolments in tertiary institutions was estimated to be 20,219 and six higher education providers were listed in Australia's top 500 exporters.²⁷

Therefore, in the space of some thirty years, the Australian International Student Program was transformed from its origins as a branch of the national humanitarian effort in Asia, to a major contributor to the Australian economy. This transformation was accompanied by intense popular debate regarding the fundamental nature of education and its role in society. As Marginson explains:

The politics of education are changing and volatile, with little consensus on some issues. Underlying these conflicts are more fundamental differences in attitudes to education. People have strongly-held views on what education ought to be doing. Their views do not always coincide.²⁸

Using a text analysis approach, my research identifies the manner in which linguistic conventions are utilised within Australian newspapers to express varying beliefs about the nature and role of the International Student Program and its intended purpose in Australian society.

Constructing International Students as 'Commodities'

The paradigmatic shift in International Student Program policy from an emphasis on aid to encompassing a more trade-oriented approach is accompanied by an equally significant change in Australian print media treatment of Program affairs. In other research, I have identified a number of print media representations of international students from Asia.²⁹ From 'casualties' of war and poverty to 'competitors' for university places to 'contributors' to greater Australia/Asia ties, each discursive construction of Asian international students presents a particular version of the Program, assigning certain roles to participants and emphasising specific aspects and objectives.³⁰ From the mid-1980s, these co-existent and competing media images of international students are joined by a new style of newspaper report. I have named this construction the 'international student as Commodity' discourse, referring to the manner in which the individual student is discussed in economic terms. Indeed, this discourse or 'way[s] of viewing the world'³¹ privileges economic factors above all other considerations.

Espousing ideologies of economic rationalism and the benefits of a free-market approach to higher education, the international student as Commodity discourse favours the use of business-related terminology. In the first two decades of Program operation, student activity is framed in the media largely in human terms, in part due to the dominance of the philanthropic interpretation of international student intake. Following the shift to a trade-oriented Program, the Commodity discourse emerges with an emphasis on ‘total spending’ by students, profit and loss summaries, projections for increased ‘revenue’,³² and the identification of an ‘export education industry’.³³ International students appear in newspaper reports as a vaguely defined, homogenous, passive group – ‘commodities’ representing much-sought after funds – their presence acknowledged only to facilitate discussion of the commercial aspects of the Program.

Universities and private colleges are depicted as ‘competing’,³⁴ for student enrolments, with the success of the Program measured using financial indicators rather than the fulfilment of educational, diplomatic, or humanitarian objectives. Reports framed within the interpretive filter of the Commodity discourse make little reference to the students’ learning requirements and social needs. The financial situation of universities is met with sympathy and the acknowledgment that, in the absence of government funding, they are faced with no choice but to actively pursue international enrolments and ‘market’³⁵ their educational services as a ‘product’.³⁶ The construction of universities within the Commodity discourse takes place in human terms in order to emphasise their suffering, whilst the government is presented as indifferent toward institutional needs and focused solely on the use of the Program to counter unfavourable trade balances.

The texts that most clearly illustrate these representations are discussed here. While my research involves the systematic exploration of newspaper coverage in order to identify emergent themes, the procedure is inherently subjective due to the deeply personal nature of the reading process.³⁷ As such, I make no claims to present the definitive reading of these media texts. Rather, I offer one interpretation and acknowledge that other readings are both possible and desirable. Likewise, I do not intend to evaluate the accuracy of these media representations, their possible correspondence to government policy, or the degree to which the views of key identities cited within media coverage are accurately depicted. Rather, I consider the implications of these discursive representations for understanding popular constructions of the shift from aid to trade as presented through the media – a major site for the construction, transmission and contestation of ideology.³⁸ While the transition to encompass commercial interests within education is not restricted to the International Student Program, international scholars in Australia represent one of the most tangible manifestations of the trend toward commercialisation due to their full-fee paying status. Therefore, the International Student Program is central to debates regarding the balance between academic and commercial concerns in the modern university.

From 'Riding on the sheep's back to balancing on a mortarboard',³⁹

In 1990, the media relayed Minister for Education, John Dawkins' statement that 'Australia had gone from riding on the sheep's back to balancing on a mortarboard'; a reference to the nation's shift from a reliance on primary industry to an increasingly service-based economy in which higher education made an important contribution to national income.⁴⁰ Within the

Australian media in the 1980s and 1990s, the ‘reinvented university’ described as ‘reshaping’ tertiary education, is referred to as ‘the pay as you learn’ system.⁴¹ Reports and editorials classified under the Commodity discourse uphold the importance of a ‘tertiary export drive’,⁴² calling for ‘far-sighted entrepreneurs’ to guide the burgeoning ‘education industry’ toward ongoing profitability.⁴³

In 1987, a report in *The Sydney Morning Herald* discussed ‘the new breed of university entrepreneurs’ describing these ‘industry’ representatives as having ‘fired both barrels of the private enterprise shotgun at a University of New South Wales graduation ceremony calling for major changes in higher education’.⁴⁴ The article explains that Dr Peter Farrell, Director of the University of New South Wales’ Centre for Biomedical Engineering announced there was ‘a cynicism about the rich that they must have made their money by cutting corners’.⁴⁵ Likewise, Professor Don Watts of Bond University – Australia’s first private, not-for-profit university⁴⁶ – is said to have ‘blasted government monopolies on over-regulation’, and criticised those who ‘use elite as a dirty word’.⁴⁷ The concept of the corporate university is upheld as the way of the future, with a growing global demand for tertiary education seen as presenting a key opportunity for Australian institutions. Incorporating a contrasting view, the article also quotes Garry Treuren, a member of Student Action for a Free Education, who reportedly claimed those supporting the privatisation of education were ‘willing to sacrifice long-term social and economic benefits for short-sighted profit motivated ventures’.

However, the conceptualising of education as a saleable item is a central tenet of the Commodity discourse and sees the media

discussion of marketing strategies and export potential in positive terms. One journalist describing education as 'not so different to a barrowful of stuffed koalas—both can be sold profitably overseas', claims 'Education institutions are making a lot of money from foreign students'.⁴⁸ This is presented within the Commodity discourse as a much-needed solution to dwindling university finances with a 1995 article in *The Age* claiming, 'Australia's cash-strapped universities have discovered a growing source of revenue to help them balance their shaky budgets'.⁴⁹ The journalist reveals that international student fees represented revenue of nearly \$753 million during 1993.⁵⁰ This is said to indicate a substantial increase in profitability, attributed mainly to the 'ever more aggressive' approach to marketing taken by universities in their recruitment 'campaigns'.⁵¹

The importance of Australian institutions remaining competitive within the international 'education marketplace' is an ongoing theme within the Commodity discourse. The 1993 claim by the convenor of the National Liaison Committee for International Students in Australia that 'years ago universities were assured they'd always get overseas students...now they have to compete and market'⁵² is reflected in the many articles that detail strategic approaches to advertising employed by Australian institutions 'vying for international enrolments'.⁵³ The use of the Internet for so-called 'hard sell' is a strategy that attracts significant media attention in the late 1990s and early 2000s.⁵⁴

As seen in a report in *The Sydney Morning Herald* entitled 'Income generation is the name of the game', newspaper reports within the Commodity discourse during the 1980s and 1990s do not tend to comment on cultural or intellectual gains of international enrolments but focus almost exclusively on financial benefits.⁵⁵ The article claims that 'Universities are becoming

highly entrepreneurial in opening up a host of fee-paying postgraduate courses that help fill their coffers'. Likewise, a report in *The Age* report advises, 'Australian educational institutions are reaping a financial bonanza by selling places to overseas students who pay fees of up to \$25,000 a year'.⁵⁶ By 1994 the 'entrepreneurial thrust' of university promotions overseas reportedly led to 'export earnings' equal to that of the nation's \$1.4 billion wheat crop.⁵⁷ The financial gains from the 'education industry' are proclaimed within the Commodity discourse as 'welcome', with the 'ideological noise' of objectors criticised as 'unnecessary'.⁵⁸

Indeed, criticisms of the market-orientated Program are countered within the Commodity discourse with assurances that 'Commercialisation has also brought greater care to delivery of services'.⁵⁹ In an article in *The Australian*, the Director of the International Studies Office at Sydney University is quoted as announcing, 'Our universities court overseas students assiduously, with major recruit programs in Asian countries. They do amazingly well in the international battle to attract overseas students, especially from Asia'.⁶⁰ Within this quote, the use of battle imagery as a metaphor for the task of securing international enrolments conveys the urgency and aggression involved in marketing higher education – a key emphasis of the Commodity discourse. The Director of the International Studies Office is further quoted as advising, 'the revenue we get enables us to do a range of things and to provide more opportunities for local students. Overseas students mean a lot to the university and to the country. They contribute more than 40% of the \$34 million we get in student fees'.

The article does not include any specific references to the cultural or educational benefits of the Program, aside from asserting that

the resulting profits are used to expand facilities and services for domestic students. This is a typical feature of the Commodity discourse in the initial stages of the trade-orientated Program. The internationalisation of curricula, the increased intercultural competence of both domestic and international students, and the furthering of bilateral relations due to the International Student Program remain largely absent from the Commodity discourse at this time.⁶¹

Counter-Commodity Criticisms: 'Australia's expanding educational supermarket'⁶²

As the Commodity discourse becomes prevalent in Australian media discussion of the International Student Program, a competing discourse emerges in response. Opposing policies of commercialisation and privatisation – or at least opposing the manner in which such policies had been implemented – this discourse contests the construction of the International Student Program purely in economic terms. Accordingly, I have labelled this media representation the 'counter-Commodity discourse' due to its resistance to the discussion of international students in terms of dollar value and its suggestion that failure to address the human side of enrolments is unjust. In the interaction of the Commodity and counter-Commodity discourses within media commentary, the reader is presented with a situation that Gee describes as the opportunity to 'juxtapose competing Discourses to see how each one frames and reframes events...this always gives rise to questions about the goals, interests, and power relationships among and inside Discourses.'⁶³

The counter-Commodity discourse presents the international student population as responding to their situation in two main forms—the passive victim and the angry protestor. At times the

representation of students within a single media report oscillates between these two images, constructing the group as vulnerable to the external mechanisms of commercial interests and yet simultaneously voicing their objections to unfair treatment. Like the Commodity discourse, the counter-Commodity discourse portrays tertiary institutions in personified terms, however the emphasis is on their construction as self-seeking, with the prime aim of maximising financial gains from the Program, at the cost of genuine educational outcomes for international students and their domestic peers. The latter remain largely absent from the discussion, but when incorporated, are presented as powerless victims of the injustices brought about by the ‘export education industry’.⁶⁴

Media reports framed within this discursive lens contest the notion of education as a product and question the use of business-related terminology such as ‘industry’.⁶⁵ Newspaper articles regarding institutional commitment to a ‘booming market’ and ‘spectacular growth’ lament the impact of the ‘trade’ mentality on ‘the ideal of the university as a place of the pursuit of significant truth fulfilling a central cultural and ethical role for society at large’.⁶⁶ The notion of the corporate university is therefore presented as incompatible with the fundamental principles of academia.

A typical editorial framed within the counter-Commodity discourse appeared in *The Sydney Morning Herald* in 1987 announcing, ‘It is a sign of the times when a 126 page green paper on higher education issued by Education Minister Mr Dawkins has one paragraph on the goals and purposes of education other than economic growth and restraining government spending’.⁶⁷ It is noted that, ‘unlike other free markets — the consumers — students exercise little demand. Rather, the government has set

itself up as repository of consumer demand and in doing so will exercise a far more centralised control than a free market philosophy would lead one to think'. This upholds the counter-Commodity construction of students as vulnerable and powerless in a climate in which 'market mechanisms' are claimed to be 'translating human relationships into commercial ones'. The editorial quotes the Vice Chancellor of Wollongong University, Professor Ken McKinnon, who is reported to have announced the trade-oriented approach 'shows an underlying scorn for universities and academics' and initiates 'the pace of change with recklessness, disregarding traditions'.⁶⁸ The Professor is quoted as identifying the ethical concerns emerging from close involvement between government, industry and university in what he terms the 'Japan Incorporated' model of higher education. Expressing similar criticisms of the trade-oriented Program, another report published in *The Sydney Morning Herald* in 1987 quotes an unnamed academic as suggesting, 'a university is a place where scholars seek truth, pursue and transmit knowledge for knowledge's sake — irrespective of the consequences, implications, and utility of endeavour'.⁶⁹

Particularly viewed as objectionable within the counter-Commodity discourse is the 'sale' of qualifications and the notion that universities 'cash in' on the internationalisation of enrolments.⁷⁰ The commercialisation of the International Student Program is presented as conflicting with the basic integrity of the teaching profession, the university institution, and the overall pursuit of knowledge. Media headlines such as 'Uni degrees for sale, up to \$150,000'⁷¹ position tertiary institutions as corporate sausage factories in 'Australia's expanding educational supermarket'⁷² where students purchase rather than earn educational qualifications.

Media coverage of a debate on privatisation held at Macquarie University in 1987 relays the comments of Anne Junor, a researcher from the New South Wales Teachers' Federation: 'Education should not be sold to foreign students like "bananas"'.⁷³ Junor's argument that the many sacrifices undertaken by international scholars to pay for courses costing up to \$100,000 for three years study, often meant institutions were 'under pressure not to fail these students especially those from developing countries' is reported. She is cited as suggesting that as a result, education standards could drop, predicting that entry requirements would be lowered, courses shortened, and contact hours reduced.

Indeed, reports of institutions lowering academic standards in order to attract greater numbers of fee-paying students are common within the counter-Commodity discourse. An article in *The Age* claims Dr Gail Graham, a former lecturer at Wollongong University, made allegations on an Australian current affairs television program that staff 'had been told to rewrite exams so fewer questions had English writing components because many overseas student couldn't read, write, or speak English'.⁷⁴ In response, university representatives from a number of institutions are quoted as 'admitting' international enrolments were 'a source of revenue', but reinforcing that international students 'had to meet standard requirements equivalent to Australian applicants'. Despite these assurances, the counter-Commodity discourse continues to claim 'The conflict at the core of overseas student programs is that, in the eyes of many academics, providing a 'good service' for the fee-paying clients is the same thing as prostituting your academic standards for the sake of a dollar'.⁷⁵

Questions regarding the ethics of the 'education industry' are also raised through the counter-Commodity discourse's criticisms of

so-called 'schemes' allegedly employed by tertiary institutions to obtain international student enrolments.⁷⁶ In 1997, Professor Lachlan Chipman, the Vice-Chancellor of Central Queensland University and member of a government inquiry into higher education, reportedly announced that recruitment agents had approached international students at his institution, offering them places at other universities, and in some cases, a \$500 incentive to switch.⁷⁷ Apparently, students were offered further rewards if they could convince friends to change institutions. The report relays Professor Chipman's claims that such practices could damage Australia's international reputation and his call for a registration system to ban the 'poaching' of students.⁷⁸ According to the article in *The Sydney Herald*, other educational institutions contacted for comment claimed that while there was anecdotal evidence of poaching, the extent of the problem was difficult to measure. The article's reference to students being 'poached' – a term widely employed in the media discussion of this issue – further conveys the counter-Commodity claims of passivity and powerlessness imposed on students in the trade-orientated Program.

Also in 1997, *The Sydney Morning Herald* reported on the 'Study with Friends' promotional campaign introduced by Central Queensland University.⁷⁹ Under the program international students received one award point for each friend who enrolled for study at the university's Sydney campus. The more family or friends students managed to entice to enrol, the more additional award points they accumulated, with rewards including free textbooks, holidays to Melbourne, Uluru or the Whitsundays, funding for family visits to Australia, and complimentary computers. According to a member of the Central Queensland University public relations department, the 'Study with Friends' promotional strategy was 'based on the latest trends in

marketing’, representing an extension on the ‘word of mouth principle’. The public relations representative is further quoted as stating such advertising campaigns were characteristic of the ‘major changes taking place in higher education’ in which institutions actively and resourcefully publicised their services.

Interestingly, the article concludes with a list of the incentives offered by Central Queensland University under the heading ‘What you get’. Numbered one to seven with each reward listed beside the number of award points required, the final item on the list – requiring seven points – simply states ‘YOU CHOOSE - let's talk!’ This may be a genuine representation of the promotional campaign, a jocular reference intended to mock the scheme or make a light-hearted comment on the commercialisation of the modern university.

Regardless, the article in *The Sydney Morning Herald* goes on to quote President of the National Tertiary Education Union, Dr Carolyn Allport who reportedly deemed such promotional strategies ‘absurd’ with the introduction of ‘base commercial incentives’ ‘demean[ing] the students and the universities themselves’. The article also claims such advertising strategies had attracted strong criticism by heads of other universities who claimed the incentive plan could do ‘irreparable damage to the competitive, multi-million dollar education market in Asia’. This report exemplifies the manner in which counter-Commodity objections to the commercialisation of education are occasionally presented as stemming from concern for the survival of the very ‘industry’ that the discourse condemns. In offering dual perspectives on the ‘Study with Friends’ promotional campaign – with the Central Queensland University spokesperson depicting the strategy as resourceful and business savvy whilst others describing such campaigns as damaging and unethical – this

article contains a mixture of Commodity and counter-Commodity discourses.

In other newspaper reports, universities offering cars and other incentives to attract international student enrolments are described as 'questionable and dishonest tactics.'⁸⁰ A 1997 report in *The Sydney Morning Herald* entitled 'Unis accused of enrolment scams' claims the Victorian Minister for Tertiary Education and Training Mr Phil Honeywood told a meeting of education ministers that Asian recruitment agents had been offered bribes in order to direct international students toward certain institutions in Australia. The Minister also reportedly claimed that in some instances recruitment agents misled students so that 'many' had illusions they could work full-time in Australia to pay for their university fees. Calling for an official government investigation into recruitment practices as well as the development of a more enforceable code of practice, Mr Honeywood is quoted as announcing 'scams' had the potential to 'damage Australia's reputation and the industry', claiming 'Overseas students inject over \$2 billion a year into Australia ... and that is due to our reputation as honest providers. Other countries, including Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States, are attracting students at our expense.' According to the report in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, the Federal Minister for Education, Senator Amanda Vanstone, rejected suggestions of an official investigation but intended to raise the concerns at an upcoming meeting of educational institutions.

Indeed, calls for a revision of the code of ethics for universities in relation to recruitment, assessment and procedures for receiving donations are repeated throughout the counter-Commodity discourse. In 2001, a report in *The Sydney Morning Herald* entitled 'Uni heads unite to fix tarnished image' announced 'The

heads of Australia's 38 universities yesterday caved in to pressure over allegations of falling standards in their institutions, promising to investigate student entry requirements and the way exams and essays are marked'.⁸¹ According to the article, the tabling of a report in the federal parliament detailing 'the promise of a \$2 million "gift" from a student who had his marks upgraded in five out of 10 subjects' had fuelled calls for clearer guidelines on donations.

The decision of the Australian Vice Chancellor's Committee to undertake a survey of all universities is described in the article as 'a bid to curb mounting concerns in the lucrative Asian student market and at home'. Professor Ian Chubb, the Australian Vice-Chancellor's Committee president, is quoted as advising the survey would help universities 'be open and upfront as a sector'. The University of Sydney's Professor Gavin Brown is quoted as stating 'it is extremely important for there to be confidence in the system [and] that the openness of the assessment and appeals process is clearly apparent' whilst Macquarie University's Professor Di Yerbury reportedly claimed:

The board [of the committee] is not aware of any deficiencies in any of the codes or guidelines, although there would be some revision if any were identified. This is mainly an exercise of consolidation and making sure the codes are well publicised and widely understood.

The National Tertiary Education Union president Dr Carolyn Allport is quoted as responding positively to the announcement of the university wide survey of practices, but at the same time questioning 'If this survey reveals problems, how will they be addressed and more importantly what is the Federal Government going to do to reduce the financial pressure that is driving universities to chase the dollar?'

Allegations of a failure to provide the necessary infrastructure for increased international student intake is another central tenet of the counter-Commodity discourse. Universities are presented as 'reaping the benefits of education exports' but failing to redirect even a limited amount of this revenue into the expansion of facilities.⁸² This is particularly emphasised in the area of English language development and support.

A report published in 1990 in *The Age* claims 'most universities have set up English language centres ostensibly to improve the English skills of their overseas undergraduates and postgraduates but fundamentally to make money for cash-starved universities from a short-course student regardless of academic potential'.⁸³ The report continues with the announcement 'It is their fees which are acceptable not their English or educational background ... Whatever their dreams they have no chance of undertaking university study in Australia'. The blame is placed squarely on the government with the accusation that 'When universities are obliged by penny-pinching governments to supplement their incomes by selling all kinds of educational services funny things tend to happen. Indeed, the whole object of the university exercise, quality, may decline'. Likewise, in a 2001 article entitled 'How the greed industry cheats overseas students', a journalist calls for universities to publish the failure rates of those paying for international education claiming intensive English language courses 'prolong the time and expense endured by students'.⁸⁴ The portrayal of Program participants as victims of the Australian 'export of education' is cemented with the concluding statement 'Universities should take time off counting their gold'.

According to *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Professor Murray Wells, Director of University of Sydney's Graduate School of

Management announced in 1991, ‘the honeymoon between Australia and overseas students is over’, with prospective students in Asia ‘well informed about the overcrowding and inadequate resources in Australian universities’.⁸⁵ In another article, Professor Wells is quoted as claiming ‘it was “immoral” to charge overseas students up to \$16,000 a year in tuition fees, only for them to be forced to queue in libraries and to stand in lecture theatre aisles’.⁸⁶ The article goes on to claim ‘His [Professor Wells’] views are held by others in higher education’. In 1996, an article in *The Age* relays a comment from an international student who claims to ‘feel like a walking dollar’.⁸⁷

Dr Don Smart, responsible for the preparation of a report on IDP⁸⁸ centres in Asia announced in *The Age* that educational issues should be the focus of promotional brochures, not commercial issues. Dr Smart is also presented as urging the government to ‘admit that it was its own financial cutbacks that led the universities to pursue the commercial course for which the government now chided them.’⁸⁹ Dr Smart is further quoted as welcoming a policy report from the Minister for Employment, Education and Training, Mr Kim Beazley, that advised shifting emphasis away from issues of commerce, arguing, ‘Improving quality in overseas education must involve more than largely wasteful window dressing’. This 1992 policy shift, in which an emphasis on internationalisation was to replace the sole focus on trade, saw amongst other things, a reduction in the commercial terminology employed in government discussion of the International Student Program.⁹⁰

During the 1980s and 1990s there is an abundance of reports describing the financial ‘hardship’ encountered by international students and widespread coverage of protests by anti-racism groups against the imposition of increased fees.⁹¹ In 1984 it was

reported in *The Sydney Morning Herald* that 'Large proportions' of 'more than 20,000 overseas students' were in danger of being 'forced to return home before completing their studies' because of increases in government charges.⁹² In 1985, The Combined Unions Against Racism group, said to represent thirty trade unions, purportedly 'attacked' the state and federal governments for 'threatening' to deport overseas students unable to pay increased university fees.⁹³ The organisation's secretary is reported as claiming that fifteen students were being 'threatened' with deportation, 'just as they were about to sit final exams'. The official spokesperson for the group is also quoted as declaring students 'won't be intimidated by threats of deportation'. The counter-Commodity's construction of students as actively defending their rights is thus upheld. Calls for the proposed action against the students to be dropped are presented in the article alongside the argument that the decision to elevate fees was 'an attack on the provision of aid to developing countries'.

Interestingly, the report in *The Sydney Morning Herald* incorporates an alternative view, informing the reader that while annual visa fees were raised by 70% from \$1,500 to \$2,500 in March of 1985, a spokesperson for the Minister for Immigration, Mr Hurlford, announced 'only about a dozen students had not paid fees thereby violating their entry permits.'⁹⁴ He is also claimed to have advised, 'they have been warned but probably won't be deported before final exams because the wheels of deportation grind mercifully slowly'. Here the emotive quality of vocabulary used in the report as well as the reiteration of vague approximations of the number of students to be deported presents a strong contrast to the few lines afforded to the government perspective. This acts to construct a sense of disinterest on the part of government officials. This theme continues in follow up reports of the protests, with the Federal Department of Education

reported to have denied the New South Wales Overseas Students' Collective claims that 'more than 2,000' overseas students were under threat of deportation.⁹⁵ Instead, a spokesperson for the department is presented as claiming that 'no more than 300 overseas students' were involved.

Likewise, the media reported comprehensively and in sympathetic terms in the counter-Commodity discourse on the hunger strike staged by 'four Asian students' to protest the tertiary fees charged to international scholars following the shift to the trade-oriented program.⁹⁶ Within the context of the Program's transition from aid to trade, the journalist advises of one student 'if he is not able to finish his degree his parents will have no hope of paying back the thousands of dollars they borrowed to see him through'. The increase of 300% in international student fees since 1980 is identified in the report as leading to the deportation of three friends of the protestors, while 'others have quietly left the country under the threat of deportation'. In 1989 it was reported that 'about one hundred' overseas students at the University of New South Wales had their enrolments cancelled and would have to leave the country after failing to pay their fees.⁹⁷ Again, the exact number of individuals involved is disputed, with the Senior Assistant Registrar at the university reported as denying that as many as one hundred students had failed to pay their fees. The International Student Services Director at the University of New South Wales, Stephen Gan, reportedly claimed, 'students are horrified and dismayed at the increases' in fees, which are estimated to have risen by approximately \$2,000 in four years. In contrast, the quotation incorporated from Minister for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs, Stuart West employs impersonal and detached language, claiming the changes were 'significantly lower than the overall increases in the cost of education for a tertiary student'.

Texts framed within the counter-Commodity discourse emphasise the importance of Australia's management of its International Student Program to the nation's reputation. The shift to the trade-oriented Program is claimed to have led to minority world countries 'educating themselves and their economic competitors rather than the poor.'⁹⁸ The importance of Australia's educational relationship with Asia and its reputation in the region is emphasised with the claim that the nation had 'turned its back on humanitarian commitments' – a view said to be widespread throughout the Asian region.⁹⁹ During a debate on privatisation held at Macquarie University in 1987, Anne Junor, a researcher from the New South Wales Teachers' Federation reportedly announced the 'sale of education' had engendered a wave of 'bitter attacks' in the Asian media on Australia's 'mercenary' attitude.¹⁰⁰

According to counter-Commodity texts, the trade-oriented Program had the potential to undermine good will created by the Colombo Plan and other forms of sponsored student intake. Academics such as Professor Murray Wells of Sydney University, are shown in the media as claiming 'Australia's reputation overseas had been seriously damaged, and it was immoral to be charging students 'big bucks' without paying sufficient attention to what was provided'.¹⁰¹ The article quotes the Professor as claiming, 'Australia's poor planning, lack of resources and lack of corrective action were well known in Asia'. Likewise, St Leon argues 'Since the palmy days of the Colombo Plan, when education was an arm of diplomacy, it has become instead yet another branch of the greed industry' and that:

Successive Australian governments have treated Asia as *milch* cows for their budget problems rather than as sources of competent students whose education in Australia might help

place future trade and diplomatic relations on a sound and educationally based footing.¹⁰²

The views of Sydney University lecturer, Phillip Jones, are relayed in an article in *The Sydney Morning Herald* advising that ‘regional goodwill towards Australia, the enhancement of education through cross cultural contacts, the encouragement of regional development and stability and the training of future Asian and Pacific leaders well disposed toward Australia’ had become ‘empty phrases in the mouths of Canberra’s policy makers’.¹⁰³ The government’s construction of education as a ‘product’ is summarised with the claim ‘Canberra sees strong demand for education in Asia and the national debt as an irresistible combination to the education policy makers’. According to the journalist, this coincides with reduction in the quality of services provided at Australian educational institutions. In conclusion the article states,

In the case of overseas students the non-monetary rewards and benefits derived from a subsidised program are now largely discounted. As Phillip Jones says, overseas student policy has become dominated by administrative, financial and marketing considerations, rather than educational, cultural and social criteria. Australia is the poorer for it.

In 1989, *The Sydney Morning Herald* reported on the fact that ‘campus novelists have had fun with the notion of the educational free market and wrote about sponsored tutorials and lecturers wearing advertising slogans on t-shirts and hats’.¹⁰⁴ This light-hearted appraisal is followed by discussion of the ‘pitfalls’ of conceiving of education as a saleable product. The educational policy of Minister Dawkins is claimed to treat education ‘like coal’, as a marketable ‘commodity’ in an approach considered ‘as much entrepreneurial as educational’. The journalist further

claims 'in the interests of earning a fast foreign buck' official reports warning the government that short courses would damage Australia's reputation were 'ignored'. The reader is confronted with the question 'Do we care how we are perceived in this region as a relatively rich and developed country selling high priced educational places largely to the rich of poorer countries while giving a smaller and smaller amount in aid?' Here the impact of Australian education policies on national reputation is raised amid claims that 'there are risks in placing too much faith in the entrepreneurial culture ... educational integrity, even international reputation may lose out and the tutor in the t-shirt marked Fosters of Tooheys ceases to be funny'.

Conclusions:

The 2000 edition of the OECD publication, *Education at a Glance*, reported that Australia had the second highest proportion of international students enrolled in tertiary institutions, worldwide.¹⁰⁵ In fifty years the International Student Program experienced exponential growth with a dramatic shift in policy tenets. Aid related considerations became less visible from the 1980s, with economic factors playing an increasingly important role into the twenty-first century.

The Asian international student as Commodity discourse mirrors the shift in Program intent to a trade-oriented focus. The emergence of the discourse within popular culture is associated with the development of an 'education industry', which is partly the result of diminishing government funding to universities. This discursive construction features the international student body as passive and faceless, gaining visibility only as a general group and only in reference to their value as a source of commercial income. Their educational and social needs remain absent in line

with their de-personalised construction as ‘commodities’. With the emphasis on education as an ‘industry’ rather than a ‘profession’, the enrolment of international students is presented as a financial undertaking first, rather than a humanitarian or culturally enriching one emphasised.

This generates a strong counter-discourse, which emerges within the media amid calls to guard against student exploitation in the ‘education industry’. Within the counter-Commodity’s disapproval of the economic model of international student enrolments, the international student body is characterised according to the dual qualities of passivity and activity — helpless amidst the economic determinism of commercial interests and yet active in protest against unfair treatment. Commercial enterprise is constructed as conflicting with traditional concepts of academic integrity. Whilst the International Student Program is identified within the Commodity discourse as a means of solving the problem of diminishing university capital, the counter-Commodity discourse presents this as an undesirable path.

According to the counter-Commodity discourse, rushing headlong into the ‘marketing’ of education and the pursuit of ‘clients’,¹⁰⁶ left little time for genuine reflection regarding the ramifications of this Program direction, the need to balance economic aspects with ethical and humanitarian considerations, and the requirement for internal checks within the system to avoid ‘abuse’.¹⁰⁷ Auletta advises that issues regarding accountability, teaching standards, student services, and the roles of government and educational providers resulted from a lack of experience regarding the effects of full fee-paying private institutions at the tertiary level, as well as an absence of a coordinating or regulatory agency.¹⁰⁸ The counter-Commodity discourse presents these issues

comprehensively in the media, as evidence of the inherent failure of the system to meet the educational needs of domestic and international students.

As mentioned previously, in 1992 the Australian government announced a new policy direction for the International Student Program, signalling a shift in emphasis from 'trade' to 'internationalisation'.¹⁰⁹ This may have been motivated by criticism of the strong commercial focus of the trade-orientated Program introduced in 1985.¹¹⁰ The transition to a clearer emphasis on internationalisation involved a change in terminology from 'overseas student' to 'international student', an effort to decrease the use of business terminology and greater attention to issues such as the internationalisation of the curriculum.¹¹¹ However, as shown here, the Commodity discourse continues to exist in the Australian print media's discussion of the International Student Program well after the introduction of a greater emphasis on internationalisation.

The interaction of the Commodity and counter-Commodity discourses within newspaper coverage of the International Student Program during the 1980s to early 2000s reveals the contestation of a range of social issues. Government funding of higher education, concerns regarding academic integrity, responsibilities regarding student welfare, and the impact of the International Student Program on Australia's international reputation are all part of this debate. Media discussions of the International Student Program and the international student population therefore provide a forum for engagement with complex social issues that reach well beyond the parameters of the International Student Program itself. At the centre of the Commodity/counter-Commodity interaction is the contestation of the fundamental nature of education as a product or a service.

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- ²⁹ Burke, Constructions of Asian International Students: The 'Casualty' Model and Australia as 'Educator'. I use the term 'Asian international student' to describe the specific focus of my research –international students from countries located in the Asian region. The origins of the International Student Program in the Colombo Plan, a humanitarian initiative aimed at stemming poverty in Asia, the importance of the Program to Australia's bilateral relations with neighbouring countries, and the fact that the Asian region has traditionally constituted a large proportion of international enrolments in Australia, render this student group an important focus for research. In this paper, I explore media coverage from the 1980s-2000s, in which ethnicity is less visible than earlier periods of reporting. Whilst students from the Asian region continued to constitute a large proportion of enrolments at this time, the international student population tends to be described in newspaper reports as 'overseas', 'foreign' or 'international', rather than being identified with home country or region.

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