

# Narratives of international education

The student perspective on the export trade in education services in Australia

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## Overview

1. Background - research project
2. Student narratives
3. Australian policy on trade in education, and immigration link
4. Reflections on impact of policy link

## 1. Research project 2006 – 2007

- ELICOS<sup>1</sup> college in Sydney
- IELTS<sup>2</sup> class - students motivated but stressed
- Interviews & observations of 12 students and 4 teachers
- Attitude to test & test classes

1 English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students

2 International English Language Testing System

## 2. Some uses of the word “narrative”

- a story: complication, evaluation, resolution (Martin & Plum 1997)
- A spoken story, an exemplum (Labov 1972; Eggins & Slade 1997)
- A way of making sense of experience (Bell 2002)

## Edward (Taiwan)

- Confident, 21 years old, passed test
- Planned to get permanent residency (PR) via patisserie – “I’m doing this course, like, only for immigration”
- He speaks with feeling of the plight of international students working & studying in Australia...

## Edward’s cautionary tale

“They better get financial help from their parents because it’s hard ...in college or maybe university...the lecturer won’t care about you. They just saw the results, it’s not like in high school... if you pass, then you pass. If you fail, you fail, even you work very hard in the course, you still fail. Same thing. So they better not to work.”

## Why international students are stressed (Edward)

“International students normally stay alone in the country they are not usually lived in, so they need to become more independent first and then maybe they still need to work hard. The language they are reading in Australia is totally different to the language which they used in their home country”.

## Sandra

- Head nurse from Korea, late thirties
- Married, two young children
- Goal: Nursing at ACU\* + permanent residency
- Whole family came to Australia: husband, children & parents
- 10 months' English tuition (6 months in IELTS class)

\*Australian Catholic University

## Sandra's story – pressure & conflict

Sandra to her teacher in her final week:

“This is my last term to get the score I need.”

Teacher's comments in interview:

“I don't really appreciate being under that kind of pressure.”

“She came up to me after class..it was premeditated.”

## In the end ...

- Sandra failed to complete EAP<sup>1</sup> course with IELTS level required for nursing
- She went on to study patisserie
- Immigration goal before educational goal
- Teacher & student stressed
- Other teachers had mixed feelings: some sympathetic, some not.

<sup>1</sup> English for Academic Purposes

### 3. Australian policy on the trade in education services

- Started in 1987 under Labor
- The result: IELTS (1991)
- IELTS used for immigration (2001)
- Tertiary qualification grounds for onshore application for PR<sup>1</sup> (2001)
- Universities now dependent on international student fees-25% of income (Moodie 2007)

<sup>1</sup> Permanent residency

### Australia's top exports 2007

Rank	Goods & services	\$ million	% growth
1	Coal	20,751	-10.8%
2	Iron ore	16,269	13.2%
3	Education (Higher education, vocational, schools & ELICOS)	12,566	17.1%
4	Personal travel	11,815	7.0%

Source: DFAT STARS  
ABS Catalogue 5368.0



## Why is Australia popular ?

- Increased interest in higher education in our region
- Proximity, safety & mild climate
- English – international language
- English/education/ immigration link
- Link between tertiary qualification and immigration – GSM<sup>1</sup> & MODL<sup>2</sup>

1. General Skilled Migration
2. Migration Occupations in Demand List

## Conflicts and tensions

- Conflicting personal agendas
  - teachers: education
  - students: immigration/education
- Competing policy agendas
  - education as government provision
  - education as export trade
  - education as immigration filter

## 4. Policy: impact on students

- Stress - financial pressure + job  
- study, reading in L2  
- alone, little support
- Pre-existing skills wasted  
e.g. Sandra
- Newly acquired skills not used  
e.g. Edward

## Policy: impact on society

- World's largest per capita percentage of international students (OECD 2007)
- Education/ immigration link affects students, teachers and institutions
- Universities – immigration function. Enrolments follow MODL.

## Reflections & recommendations

- GSM program is having little effect on skills shortage (Birrell et al 2006)
  - English language skills inadequate
  - pressure on students & institutions
- Re-evaluate link between Australian tertiary qualification & PR
  - distortion of market
  - extra funding to language support