

Rationales and representations: international students in UK national policy from 1999-2013 (0095)

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### **Abstract**

This project mapped changes and continuities in UK national policies towards international students in higher education, and critically examined discursive representations of international students therein. With the exception of Walker (2014) and Tannock (2013) there is scant literature on international student policies in the UK. An inductive qualitative thematic analysis of public policy documents was conducted. Four primary rationales were identified for increasing international student recruitment: enhancing the UK's diplomatic influence, increasing education quality, attracting income, and attracting skilled immigration. The first three were characteristic of policy under the Blair administrations. Opposition to immigration became a barrier to international student recruitment after 2009-10. Students were represented in multiple paradoxical ways as: global ambassadors, co-educators for cross-cultural knowledge, desirable workers, 'bogus' students, in academic and cultural deficit and 'the brightest and the best'. Overall, policy discourses generalised and quantified international students, and placed their interests second to those of the UK.

### **Paper**

This project mapped changes and continuities in UK national policies towards international students in higher education, and critically examined discursive representations of international students therein. With the exception of Walker (2014) and Tannock (2013) there is scant literature on UK policies regarding international students. Similar literature has been done in Canada (Karram 2013) and Australia (Sidhu 2002; Sidhu and Dall'Alba 2014), and Geddie (2015) has explored UK policies from a migration perspective. This research sought to examine and synthesise policies from the fields of migration, finance, and higher education in order to map key policies.

This study results from analysis of public documents relating to international students from a range of policy actors. A qualitative inductive thematic analysis was conducted, using Bacchi's (2009) 'what is the problem represented to be' framework. The main themes identified were categorised as either rationales for international student recruitment, or barriers.

The first, though least frequently employed, rationale is that of global diplomacy, arguing that recruiting international students increases the UK's influence overseas: "UK alumni have created a network of people in positions of influence around the world who can promote British foreign policy goals, including by opening doors to people, resources and information we would not otherwise have been able to access" (BIS 2013, 39). In this

narrative, international alumni are represented as 'global ambassadors', advocating for the UK when they obtain positions of social or political influence upon their return to their home country: International students "return home with an enhanced appreciation of British life, ideas and values, culture and institutions, and a good command of the English language; (and) As they rise to positions of influence in their professions, their experience is likely to predispose them to look to Britain for ideas, technology, trade and investment" (UKBA 2008, 4).

Secondly, international students are argued to increase the general quality of education and student experience: "(i)nternational students in the UK bring diversity to the education sector, helping to provide an international dimension that benefits all students" (BIS 2013, 24). This narrative suggests that diversity, seen as people with different nationalities, is a pedagogical benefit, leading to improved quality of experience. Quality is seen as a way to attract international students (reified as student satisfaction indices - see Sabri 2013): "Britain's brand position has always been 'quality education', but this has become a tired concept that needs re-imagining...redefining 'quality' to include quality of student experience, facilities, welcome and liveability as well as education per se." (British Council 1999). It has also become represented to be a consequence of their presence. International students are here represented as embodiments of globalization, almost as teaching assistants, as well as rational consumers of 'experience' as education.

Thirdly, immigration has been both a rationale and a barrier. During the Blair administration, it was a rationale as international graduates were seen to be highly skilled migrants and therefore beneficial to the knowledge economy in the UK by filling skills gaps. International graduates are therefore presented as solutions for particular industries, to be 'designer migrants' (Kell and Vogl 2008). However, after 2010, immigration became represented as a barrier. Here the problem is represented to be too much immigration, flooding low-skilled labour markets. The proposed solution is the widely publicised drive to reduce net migration "to within the tens of thousands" (May 2010; Cameron 2011). When international students are classified as migrants - "the majority of non-EU migrants are, in fact, students" (May, 2010) - they are re-cast from 'desirable' to 'undesirable', and enmeshed in assumptions about pressures on social services and visa system abuses (Blinder 2012; Philo et al., 2013). The student visa application process and requirements for higher education institutions became increasingly stringent, as they aim to "improve selectivity of students and Post-Study Work Route migrants to the UK, to ensure they are the brightest and the best and those making the highest economic contribution" (Home Office 2011, 1). International students become categorised in a binary of either 'bogus' or 'legitimate', only desirable if they are the 'brightest and the best' or wealth creators, and short-term, not long-term migrants.

The financial or market-based rationale is the most prevalent: International education is both "a major contributor to national wealth and economic development" (British Council 2012, 3) and "a tradable sector ...like any other tradable sector, such as manufacturing" (Conlon et

al. 2011, 12). The income that international students generate for the wider economy is frequently cited, for example: "international students bring in around £8 billion a year to the UK" (Home Affairs Committee 2009, 10). International student policy is consistent with trends in the marketization of higher education (Dill 1997; Marginson 1997; Molesworth et al. 2009; Brown and Carasso 2013). The Prime Minister's Initiative aimed to "develop and market a world-beating brand for British education that will create the demand from international students that will satisfy member institution needs" (British Council 2000, 16). Thus demand is not pre-existing, but needs to be created, and the ultimate beneficiary is the higher education sector. This was based on a market research project (the Gilligan report) which castigated the sector for a lack of "marketing professionalism" (British Council 2000, 7). The intensification of marketing and branding in international higher education was a characteristic of the Prime Minister's Initiative and has continued under the Coalition Government. In this narrative, international students are represented as vectors of income, and again as consumers.

So, from 1999-2013, there are more commonalities in policy discourses on international students than differences. Throughout this period, students are valued inasmuch as they bring income, sustain and improve education, and act as ambassadors. During the New Labour governments, they were also valued as skilled migrants, but under the Coalition Government, they were suspected of being 'bogus' or illegitimate. Rarely, are students named or identified individually. Nor are their particular individualities, characteristics or choices (except study destinations) highlighted. While this is characteristic of government policy, the potential effects of powerful policy discourses which portray and define international students should be examined.

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