International students in UK national policy: quality, consumers and Other (0084)

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Abstract

As numbers of international students have increased in the UK, policies have been developed to formalise state responses. While policies have developed and changed over the last twenty years, the theme of quality has been continuous across New Labour and Coalition administrations. This paper presents data from a critical qualitative textual analysis, adopting a discourse theory approach informed by Bacchi's 'what is the problem represented to be' framework. I argue that policies on international students have constructed a marketised concept of quality, premised on the equivalence between student experience/satisfaction and educational quality. International students are seen to enhance quality by their presence as nationally and culturally diverse, to promote reputation by word of mouth and to evaluate quality as consumers. International students are represented as Other, consumers and arbiters of quality. Through critical research of this nature, alternative constructions can be generated in resistance to dominant subject representations.

Paper

Numbers of international (non-EU) students in the UK have increased significantly over the last two decades, from 116,840 in 1997-1998 to 312,305 in 2014-2015 (HESA, 1998, 2015). The UK has had policies on international students in higher education (HE) arguably for the last 50 years (Humfrey, 2011; Walker, 2014). These policies have been explicit since the 1999 launch of the Prime Minister's Initiative (PMI). This paper critically analyses policy discourses, using qualitative textual analysis. Policies were found to focus on the national benefits of increasing international student recruitment. These rationales are premised on normative frameworks, which this paper aims to expose using Carol Bacchi's 'what is the problem represented to be' framework (2009). It asks what the problem is represented to be, what assumptions are made, and how social subjects are represented.

The PMI was the first coherent UK policy on international students, uniting changes to visas, scholarships and marketing. It presented the benefits of international students to the UK's reputation, political influence, education and finances (Blair, 1999; Tannock, 2013). From 2006, the second stage of the PMI, the Initiative for International Education (PMI2), emphasised enhancing international student experiences (Blair, 2006). From 2010, the Coalition Government oversaw migration policy changes which affected international students, aimed at reducing net migration to the "tens of thousands" (Cameron, 2011; Jenkins, 2014). In 2013, the Coalition published the still current International Education Strategy (IES) which highlights the value of 'education exports' and international students for the "massive contribution" they make economically, educationally and culturally to the UK (BIS, 2013a).

To attract international students, a “reputation for quality” is considered essential (Blair, 1999; DfES, 2004; QAA, 2012; BIS, 2013a). The initial target of the PMI was to “make Britain the first choice for quality” (Blair, 1999; DfES, 2004). The UK’s tradition of high-quality HE (BIS, 2013a) is argued to be inadequate to compete in the modern marketplace. Therefore, reputation needs management and enhancement; for example, through the Education UK Counselling Service (BC, 1999), and branding initiatives like the Britain is GREAT campaign (BIS, 2013a). This model of competitive HE relies on discourses of marketisation, wherein HE is a tradeable service which providers need to ‘sell’ to consumers.

International students are seen as vehicles for internationalisation, a sign of high-quality education (DTZ, 2011), benefiting home students who “gain from the window on the world which contact with international students gives them” (Blair, 1999). This prepares all students for “careers in the global economy” (DfES, 2006), which enhances the UK’s market position. Employability and quality are therefore intrinsically linked. An image of international students as teaching assistants or ‘resource’ emerges, responsible for communicating their cultural knowledge to UK students. Although internationalising the classroom is represented as empowering, moving away from mono-cultural knowledge transmission (Hyland, *et al.,* 2008), it may be experienced by students as exploitative or in conflict with their perceived role as consumer. The pedagogic benefits of multicultural classrooms and campuses are taken for granted, despite mixed teaching and learning experiences (Turner, 2009; Caruana and Ploner, 2010).

International students enhance education merely by being present, “bring(ing) diversity to the education sector” (BIS, 2013a, p.24). Indeed, their numbers are used in international rankings, signifying quality (BIS, 2013b, p.5). Students with nationalities or countries of residence other than the UK are counted as diverse (BIS, 2013b), such that home students are understood as the norm. Diversity is considered the result of cultural differences based on nationality (Böhm, *et al.*, 2004, p.39). This understanding of diversity is “trapped within a set of nation-centric assumptions” (Rizvi and Lingard, 2010, p.194). Although diversity is invoked to value difference, such discursive framing paradoxically highlights difference and sets home in contrast to international students (Marginson, *et al.,* 2010). This creates a binary social identification, working as a dividing practice (Foucault, 1982; Bacchi, 2009). It therefore marginalises (Rose and Miller, 2008) and Others international students (Asgharzadeh, 2008; Marginson, *et al.*, 2010).

Quality of education is rebranded “to include quality of student experience, facilities, welcome and livability, as well as education per se” (BC, 1999). This enables its measurement through satisfaction and interpreted as success where it leads to reputational gains (DTZ, 2011; BIS, 2013a). The intrinsic quality of aspects of the ‘learning experience’ is not measured; instead students’ satisfaction with them is. Equating satisfaction with experience as a proxy for quality is premised on a marketised model of HE (Ashwin, *et al.,* 2015). This subjectivity is unproblematic in policy discourse because the aim is to improve reputation, via the perceived quality of experience. This makes international HE susceptible to evaluation (Rose and Miller, 2008) and state action (Foucault, 1977). The concept of student experience builds on a rational consumer (Sabri, 2011), who needs to be satisfied to generate “brand loyalty” and reputational advantage.

International students are represented as consumers (BC, 1999; BIS, 2013b). The nation state is the main agent, rather than the student-as-consumer (Fairclough, 1989). Students are acted upon (Askehave, 2007; Naidoo, *et al.*, 2011): managed,

communicated with, offered products, competed for, offered a service, marketed to, profiled, and protected. This discursively created subject position is defined by consumer-like relations, actions, and rights (Foucault, 1972). This encourages students to exert consumer rights, such as complaints, rather than universal citizen rights (Marginson, *et al.,* 2010). It encourages students to see an education as something to 'have' rather than 'be' (Molesworth, *et al.*, 2009). While the role of a consumer could adopt more empowering modes (Williams, 2012), the position created is limited, where economic power confers rights rather than universal human rights (Marginson, *et al.,* 2010).

In conclusion, international students are discursively represented as consumers. They evaluate the quality of their learning experience, substituted for education quality. Their satisfaction determines how UK HE is perceived, creating a reputation for quality. Students are also seen as passive resources for internationalisation: their diversity generates intercultural learning for UK students. Valuing difference as diversity establishes a dividing practice between international and home students. This policy discourse disempowers critical international student voices in a neo-colonial assignation of 'Otherness'.

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