

Studying Consent: Subjectivity and the Labour Process of International Student Workers

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the degree of

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under the supervision of Professor Carl Rhodes and
Professor Peter Fleming

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Certificate of original authorship

I, Hongbo Guo, declare that this thesis, is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the UTS Business School at the University of Technology Sydney.

This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. Besides, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

This research is supported by the Australian Government Research Training Program.

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Glossary of Terms

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics, Australian Government
CNI	Critical Narrative Inquiry
DET	Department of Education and Training, Australian Government
DESE	Department of Education, Skills and Employment, Australian Government
DFAT	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australian Government
DHA	Department of Home Affairs, Australian Government
ELICOS	English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students
FWO	Fair Work Ombudsman, Australian Government
HREC	Human Research Ethics Committee
ICEF	International Consultants for Education and Fairs
ILO	International Labour Organisation
ITA	International Trade Administration
LPT	Labour process theory
NCEE	The National College Entrance Examination
NSW	New South Wales, Australia
PSW	Post Study Working visa
SAR	Special Administrative Region
SMH	The Sydney Morning Herald
UK	United Kingdom
UKCISA	UK Council for International Student Affairs
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
USA	United States of America
USDC	US Department of Commerce
USYD	The University of Sydney, Australia
VET	Vocational Education and Training

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Abstract

International student workers experience precarious work conditions, yet they remain silent about widespread underpayment and other exploitative labour practices. Adopting a labour process theory approach, this research challenges the dominant emphasis on the structural factors within extant international student literature and, by ‘bringing the workers back in’, investigates the multiplicity and complexity of lived experiences of international students. To counter determinist tendencies in the extant literature, this research uses critical narrative inquiry to answer three interrelated questions: why international students engage in work, how they constitute themselves as subjects through work organisation, and to what extent they reproduce conditions they may otherwise resist.

The findings of this research reveal how worker consent is constructed, or attempted to be constructed, among international student workers. It confirms that many international students worked for economic incentives, but many other students coming from middle- or upper-class family backgrounds engaged in work to be their own breadwinner. The narratives of independence from their families were found across all participants. Work opportunities remain bounded for international students, and their ‘student before worker’ identity further drove them to casualised, informal, and deskilling work. Moreover, their fragmented work lives led to a high turnover rate, where meaningful social relations were seldom maintained. This research revealed that their worker consent developed through an ideological illusion where work legitimacy did not matter as much as what they thought they were pursuing. The findings also reveal how internalised oppressions and being ‘international’ can contribute to their work consent. International students, most of whom come from Asian countries, were constructed as a racialised subject in opposition to others. Their established sense of inferiority, a desire to be more (White) Australian and intra-group discrimination could form their work strategies.

This thesis has made theoretical and practical contributions. It attends to the unique individual identities, agency, resistance and non-resistance of international students. It has explored ways in which their engagement in work is not entirely money driven. This research contributes to labour process theory through its focus on the continuity of the labour process, which centres on studies and transcends national borders. It advances the theorisation of worker consent by interrogating how internalised oppression may contribute to their consent to exploitation from a critical perspective. The practical contribution of this research lies in its insights about measures that can be taken to protect and empower this workforce group.