International Student Expectations:
Undergraduate Student Voices in an Australian University

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of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education

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Certificate of authorship/originality

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of the requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged in the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Signature of Candidate

(Stephen Neil Howlett)
Acknowledgements

First, I express my gratitude to the students who participated in this study, and to the teachers and education managers at the research site who shared with me so generously their classes, time, ideas and dreams for the future.

My journey as a teacher was principally inspired by the example and encouragement of the teachers at the Sydney College of Advanced Education (now a part of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences in the University of Technology, Sydney) in the 1980s. In particular, I was inspired by the example of Ian Cornford, who remained a constant mentor and friend over many years, and until the time of his retirement in February 2008, was the Principal Supervisor of this work.

When I arrived in the research site, it was Ken Hawkins who encouraged me to begin to understand some of the practical issues and possibilities that inform the discourse in international education; and to then describe these for others so that our practice might thrive and prosper. Later, working and learning with Alison Owens across the full expanse of university teaching with international students was a high point in my career.

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I dedicate this thesis to my family, from whom I learned something of understanding and perseverance; and to the future of all the young people from many nations that I have been honoured to call my students. They would have enjoyed knowing that sharing some small part of their learning journey might benefit others who engage in the practice that we call international education.
Abstract

The education of full-fee paying international students is a multi-billion dollar business in Australia. One consequence of global market growth is the entry of new and increasingly aggressive competitors in the international marketplace who are gaining market share at the expense of traditional suppliers such as Australia. This has opened a new dimension in the discourse: the imperative of commercial sustainability in international education and its effect on good practice.

Students from the Indian subcontinent represent a fast growing but also a volatile demographic for Australian universities. This study explores the experiences of a cohort of Sub-continental international students studying a Bachelor of Accounting degree in an Australian university. It was conducted on the city campus of a teaching-intensive university that caters exclusively to full-fee paying international students. The work captures a cross-sectional appreciation of the perceptions of the student sample during their learning journey in Australia.

The research takes the approach of problematising student expectations in order to generate questions investigated through a survey questionnaire and in interviews with students on site. The study seeks to engage with students’ voices through dialogue with the researcher. The framework for analysis is grounded in a symposium approach and an appreciation of four theoretical fields of international education, literacy and critical thinking, commercial practice, and the policy agendas surrounding international education in Australia, to create a trans-disciplinary perspective of teaching as business. To date, there exist no published studies of Sub-continental student experiences which have conducted this particular kind of enquiry.

The research finds that these students’ perceptions are reflected within and across the theoretical constructs and can thus be used to derive a better appreciation of value in an international education experience. International students’ perception of value is found to derive in the first instance from satisfaction of their expectations as a consumer-student. Such students’ perception of value is found to be further
enhanced, and satisfaction in their other role as a student-consumer improved, if constructs of difference between international and domestic students are no longer problematised within the discourse.

The study presents an alternative holistic conceptual frame for theorising agendas in international education. That frame foregrounds student expectations in order to improve the practice of international education. The research outcome paves the way for proposing what might constitute an equitable, ethical and sustainable interaction between business and education that can strengthen the prestige and commercial position of Australian universities in the global market of services.

**Keywords**

accounting  
action research  
Australia  
Bangladesh  
commercial sustainability  
competition  
consumer satisfaction  
consumer-student  
critical thinking  
education  
ethics  
equity  
ESL English as a second language  
ESOS educational services for overseas students  
global development  
global market  
globalisation  
India  
international education  
international students  
L1  
L2  
learning expectations  
market growth  
migration  
needs and expectations  
Nepal  
overseas students  
Pakistan  
Pedagogy  
relational  
risk  
social justice  
Sri Lanka  
student-consumer  
student voice  
Sub-continental  
sustainability  
symposium methodology  
TBL triple bottom line  
teaching-intensive university  
undergraduate
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Introduction

Analysis

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  Balancing study and part-time work

  Theme 2 - Word of mouth advice from family and friends is the main form of preparing for university study in Australia

  Theme 3 - Participants were confident about living and studying in Australia but concerned about receiving value for money

  Theme 4 - University learning in Australia has not been a great challenge

  Plagiarism

  Keeping quiet in class

  Theme 5 - The overall university experience has matched expectation but the perception of value has not

  Theme 6 - The cost of living and work-study balance has been harder than expected

  Theme 7 - Student voice reinforces the concept of students as consumers

  Theme 8 - Students in their first term were generally less confident than others

Summary of the analysis

Patterns of data for each research question

Conclusion

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Introduction

Answers to the research questions

  1. How Sub-continental international students perceive their experience of study in an Australian university
  2. The relationship between student perceptions and the twin conversations of educational and commercial imperatives

Conclusions about the research problem

  1. Value in an international education experience derives from delivering satisfaction to the student-consumer
  2. Language need not be an issue of difference in an international education experience

  Domestic and International

  Learning in L1 and L2

  An alternative: cultural proficiency

  3. The relationship between student perceptions of value and the twin conversations of educational and commercial imperatives represents an opportunity for both good teaching and good business

Implications and recommendations arising from the research conclusions

  Implications

  Recommendations for stakeholders

    1. Recognise that for Sub-continental students their expectation as a consumer-student shapes the overall experience
    2. Leverage word of mouth relationships to minimise notions of difference between international and domestic students
    3. Conceptualise excellence as a triple bottom line

Limitations
# International Student Expectations

## Conclusion

Generally, how confident are you? (Q.33-56)  
Summary  
Settling-in (Q.33-37)  
Interacting with others at university (Q.38-46)  
Applying learning (Q.47-56)  
Conclusion  

Generally, how do you deal with …? (Q.57-66)  
Summary  
Conclusion  

General feelings about the experience (Q.67-87)  
Summary  
What has been your overall experience? (Q.67-82)  
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What is harder at university in Australia? (Q.84)  
Is there anything else? (Q.85-87)  
Conclusion  

Students in their first term of study at the university  
Conclusion

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