Chapter 10

Assessing the International Student Enrolment Strategies in Australian Universities:
A Case Study During the COVID–19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Travel restrictions in the COVID-19 pandemic cause a significant drop in international student enrolment. To cope with such drastic change, this study aims to assess the international student enrolment strategies in Australian universities during the pandemic. Using the critical theory as a theoretical framework, this case study first probed into the problems of the current international student enrolment strategies by taking power and discourses into consideration. The problems identified include the marginalisation of international students and hindrance in their empowerment. Then, this study proposed some future directions for international student enrolment in relation to international students' concerns and needs, alongside migration policies and workforce demands. The future directions include increasing their chances to be academically competitive and equip them to prepare for their future career. The findings can be useful for university management to devise better strategies to recruit and retain international students in the post-pandemic era.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic brings enormous impact to higher education, with the travel restriction impeding international students from getting overseas to pursue or continue their studies (Vivian & James, 2020; Daley & Mackey, 2020). Border closure blocks the high fee-paying international students from entering the country, making them unable to assess the on-campus learning assets (ABC 2020; Daley & Mackey,

2020; Thatcher et al., 2020). As a result, many international students decided to terminate their studies in Australia. Such significant drop in higher education student enrolment can take a multi-year recovery to get the number of international students back to the pre-pandemic level (Thatcher et al., 2020).

The education sector has been one of the major incomes for the Australian economy as overseas student tuition fees have contributed to a significant proportion of university revenue (Ferguson & Sherrell, 2019). This can be reflected in the income generated by nearly 400,000 international students in 2017-2018, which is worth AUD$32.4 billion (Ferguson & Sherrell, 2019). Such exclusion of international students has brought not only financial crisis among the Australian universities. The incapability of bringing in high fee-paying overseas students can also be impactful to Australia's domestic skilled workforce and her influence in the world with a loss of potential future corporate, political and trading partners (Ferguson & Sherrell, 2019).

According to scholars (Jackson, 1978; Kelchen, 2018; Law et al., 2019; Wetzel et al., 1998), student enrolment not only means the student status in schools, but also includes the recruitment of the prospective students and retention of the current students, whereby students' motivations, commitments and decisions have to be taken into consideration. Currently, the universities employed a myriad of student enrolment strategies to recruit and retain their international students. For instance, they extend their reach of prospective students through social media and recruitment agents. They also attempt to retain the current international students by having a rapid transition to online study to facilitate them to continue with their degree progression (Bolton, 2020; Thatcher et al., 2020).

Purpose of the Study

This study aims to examine the current international student enrolment strategies and propose the future directions of international student enrolment by investigating international students' learning experiences during the pandemic. With the aim stated above, the research is guided by three research questions:

1. What are the international student enrolment strategies of Australian universities in and after the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What are the problems of the existing strategies of international student enrolment?
3. What are the possible ways to retain and recruit international students during and after the pandemic?

Guided by the above research questions, this book chapter first outlines the current international student enrolment strategies of the Australian universities and highlighted the current research gaps. Then, it identifies the problems of the existing strategies with the guidance of the Critical Theory. Next, the researcher proposes the possible strategies of student recruitment in relation to the national needs and migration policies to maintain the universities' long-term sustainability. The findings of this study hope to add momentum to maintain or achieve success in professionalism among not only market-leading universities, but also other private and public universities worldwide in both urban and rural settings.

Significance of this Study

This study is unique in probing into the international students' learning experience during the pandemic using the Critical Theory. It is a novel study in the field to examine the current enrolment strategies by examining the power relationship between international students, government and universities. It also

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