Narratives of international education: the student perspective on the export trade in education services in Australia

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Abstract

International education is a major contributor to the Australian economy. By the end of 2007, it was ranked third, after coal and iron ore, as an export earner, having overtaken tourism to become the most successful service industry in Australia. The financial success of the industry, however, overshadows other aspects of the trade in education.

In this paper, I focus on the role of government policy in international education, and its effect on overseas students. Government policy decisions regarding the IELTS (International English Language Testing System) testing regime, and the linking of education and immigration, have had a major impact on international students. As part of a research project at my workplace, an ELICOS (English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students) college in Sydney, I conducted a series of interviews to determine the students' reactions to policy decisions and to other aspects of their lives and studies here. The interviewees were teachers and students in IELTS preparation classes. These classes prepare students for the IELTS test, which can be used for entry to university or college, or for immigration purposes. The student responses are presented here as narratives, each being a different perspective on the lived experience of international education in Australia. Through these narratives, the impact of the export trade in education on students is presented and analysed in the context of government policy on trade and education.

1 Introduction

At my workplace, an ELICOS (English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students) in Sydney, we cater for international students who wish to learn English, for a wide range of motives. They may wish to study at college, high school or university; they may wish to improve their general English communicative abilities, for reasons related to travel or work; or they may wish to obtain permanent residency in Australia. As part of

my doctoral thesis at UTS, I decided to conduct interviews with students and teachers in the IELTS (International English Language Testing System) classes at my workplace. The genesis of my project lay in my observation that the IELTS classes were so different from the other classes, highly motivated yet highly stressed. In this paper, I concentrate on two student interviews, and the narratives that emerge from them, in order to convey a sense of the experience of the education/ immigration nexus from the student perspective. I then discuss the underlying policy decisions that shaped these experiences, and the way that they have unfolded.

2 Research Project

The interviews were conducted at my workplace in 2006 – 2007. I interviewed 12 students and 4 teachers. The interviews were semi-structured, so that while each interview covered the same areas overall, interviewees were able to express their opinions on other related topics if they wished. Sandra, the Korean nurse whose experiences I draw on most extensively in this paper, was not an interviewee. Her story is based on multiple observations, in that all of the teachers spoke about her, each with a slightly different perspective. Hers is part of a wider narrative, the workplace stories that are frequently referred to by teachers to illustrate a point. Edward was an interviewee, whom I chose to discuss because of the story he told, and because of the contrast between these two student perspectives.

3. The word ‘narrative’

Narrative is understood here to mean a story that has a simple basic structure, within a framework defined by functional linguistics and conversation analysis. Narratives minimally involve a complication, evaluation and resolution (Martin & Plum 1997). Sandra’s story fits this pattern. It is a written rather than an oral narrative, having been reconstructed after the events occurred and not given in an interview. I have constructed her narrative from the many references to her in the interviews with teachers.

Oral narratives of personal experience studied by the American linguist Labov (Labov & Waletsky 1967; Labov 1997) suggest that narrative is constructed as a "folk theory of causality" leading to the assignment of praise or blame. Edward's story fits this description, a story within his own personal narrative, which would be classed in conversation analysis as an exemplum, a story which makes a judgement about a significant incident or incidents (Eggins & Slade 1997).

The term "narrative" is also used in conjunction with "the epistemological assumption that we as human beings make sense of random experience by the imposition of story structures" (Bell 2002). This construction of meaning is evident in Edward's interpretation of events, and in the teachers' different but intersecting attitudes to Sandra and her life choices.

Narrative 1: Edward and his cautionary tale

Edward was a twenty-year-old from a well-to-do family in Taiwan. His mother had promised to buy him a car if he completed a tertiary qualification in Australia. He was young and confident and had no trouble passing the General version of IELTS (International English Language Testing System), which was what he required for college entry, to study patisserie. He was clear about his goals and his modus operandi: "I'm doing this course, like, only for immigration … After I become a permanent resident, maybe I will choose what I like. Because you got cheaper fees."

He was a young man of definite opinions, who advised against students working and studying, in the strongest possible terms. His bleak cautionary tale is generic, with no specific instances or events, but the evaluation is unequivocal: work and study don't mix.

> [International students] better get financial help from their parents because it's hard, because like in college or maybe university, it's all the same, the lecturer won't care about you they just saw the results, it's not like in high school, so everything…maybe you can do whatever you want but if

> you pass, then you pass, if you fail, even you work very hard in the course, you still fail. Same thing. So they better not to work.

His observations of the problems facing international students extended to the fact that they face multiple challenges in another country, being alone, having to be independent and maybe find paid work as well. He also mentioned reading as a particular source of difficulty: “the language they are reading when they study in Australia is totally different to the language which they used in their home country.” Despite the fact that he was himself a successful student, who had achieved his goals easily, his view of the world of international students is grim, showing students struggling in an uncaring system.

Narrative 2: Sandra’s story

Sandra was quite a different character. She was older, more serious and much less confident in her English. She and her family had staked everything on her success in her studies, and she was understandably nervous about her prospects. She was a nurse from South Korea, much respected by the other Koreans in the school because she had been a head nurse in Korea. She was in her late thirties and had a young family, who were still in Korea when she came to Australia at the beginning of 2006. Her goal was to be at an Advanced level of English by the end of the year, even though she was starting as an elementary student. She intended to go on to university, to study nursing, and so obtain permanent residency in Australia. She hoped to do this by hard work. Elementary is a level 2 class, while Advanced is the highest class, level 6. This was a very ambitious plan, particularly considering her age.

Things did not go to plan. Her progress was not as fast as she had hoped. As time went on, her family came to join her in Australia, first her husband, then her children and finally her parents. This was an added stress, since all were relying on her to provide the basis for their future lives in Australia. She transferred to the IELTS class from Intermediate (level 4) and spent the next 6 months there, against the advice of her

teachers, who felt she needed to improve her general English. Her focus was on the test, which held the key to both immigration and education for her. It became apparent that her language skills were not adequate for the Academic IELTS, a fact established by her performance in our internal testing.

The week before her last test with us, Sandra approached the teacher, Tom, with the words “This is my last term to get the score I need”. He was most upset. He told me in the interview:

> She came up to me after class and she said this to me. I mean it was premeditated, she thought about it and she came up to me and sort of said this to me … I don’t appreciate that and I don’t really appreciate being under that kind of pressure as a teacher either.

Tom was relating these events some weeks later, but the emotion was still quite raw. He deeply resented Sandra’s desperate move to suborn the process, which involved her satisfactorily completing our EAP (English for Academic Purposes) class. This she did not do. Yet again, Sandra failed to get the score she needed. After ten months at the language school, constantly confronted by the frustration of performing poorly in the simulated tests we offer, she lowered her sights and sat the General IELTS test. She received a score that allowed her entrance into college, where she enrolled in patisserie, another course acceptable under the GSM (General Skilled Migration) program. She sacrificed her professional goal to her immigration goal, and her skills as a nurse have been lost to Australia.

The teachers, who told me various parts of this story, had different perspectives on Sandra and her difficulties. Despite his experience with Sandra, Tom believed that most of our students at that time had come to Australia for study purposes alone. In my small research project, however, 6 of the 12 students I interviewed wanted to immigrate. Another teacher, Peter, assumed that most of the students did not want to immigrate because most of them were not doing the General test. He was unaware of the GSM pathway to immigration. He advised Sandra to leave the IELTS class, because her

English language skills were not improving, but she refused to leave, because of her focus on the test. Unlike Tom, he did not find the IELTS class at all enjoyable to teach.

Another teacher, Sonia, spoke of Sandra as the "lovely Korean lady" and felt very sympathetic to her plight. She felt that Australia was "missing out on somebody that has all that experience". She said that Sandra was going to do a patisserie or cooking course, "because that's what the government needs and that's the thing that gets you however many points … I think it's a waste". Matt, the fourth teacher, felt sorry for Sandra as well, particularly because of the family pressure. The entire family was depending on her to succeed. Their immigration strategy was focused on her, and as he said, "it's like they're all sitting on her back."

Sandra's story illustrates the pressure that comes to bear on both teachers and students when immigration is contingent upon educational outcomes. I now trace the history and repercussions of policy decisions in this area, and the factors influencing these decisions.

4 Policy background

Education is part of the globalised trade in services. According to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (2007) it has been the success story of Australian trade in the past decade, having overtaken tourism in that year. Education is now the third highest earner of export income in Australia, after coal and iron ore. It is also the industry showing the highest growth of the top four export earners (see table 1).

This success is based on a number of factors. One such factor is the increasing appetite for higher education worldwide, particularly in neighbouring countries in south-east Asia (Marginson & Rhoades 2002; Marginson 2006), where domestic provision of tertiary education does not meet demand. Proximity, a reputation for safety and a benign climate also play a part in our popularity within the region. Another important factor is the rise of English as the international lingua franca, and the desire among students for a degree or other qualification from an institution in an English-speaking country. Finally, in my

view, one of the most important factors in the attractiveness of Australia to international students is the policy link that has been established between education and immigration.

Increasingly, Australia has emphasized the ability to speak English in its immigration points system. In research into the Canadian and Australian labour markets, Richardson (2002) attributes the greater success of migrants to Australia in finding employment to the greater emphasis on English. In 2001 the IELTS test was chosen by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) as virtually the only test for the assessment of English. Overseas professionals such as health professionals are assessed via the OET (Occupational English Test) and it is possible to use the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) in some cases, but by far the most commonly used test in Australia is IELTS. Worldwide, its growth since the first test was administered has been extraordinary. From its beginnings in 1991, when 2,000 students sat the test, the figure has grown to 938,000 in 2007.

The popularity of IELTS in Australia has led to a waiting list of three to four months for students who wish to sit the test. This popularity is due to the fact that the test can be used for a number of purposes. There are two versions of the test. The Academic module of the test was originally designed for students requiring university entry, and the General module for entry to colleges for technical and further education. Since the DIMIA (now DIAC) decision of 2001, however, the General test is most commonly used for immigration purposes. The Academic module, designed for university entry, has become a de facto immigration test as of June 2001. At that time the decision was made to encourage international students who had completed a tertiary qualification in Australia to apply for permanent residency onshore (Birrell et al 2006). The qualification needed to be in a profession on the Migrant Occupations in Demand List (MODL), as part of the General Skilled Migration Program (GSM).

Reflections on Policy

Since 1999, Australia's General Skilled Migration Program has required those granted a visa under this program to demonstrate their English proficiency through attaining a level of 5 on the General IELTS test, the score needed if they wish to practice a trade. As a result, international students like Sandra and Edward, who aspire to permanent residency in Australia, often enroll in courses for trades such as cooking and hairdressing, after obtaining this score, for reasons of expediency. Birrell (2006 p 55) underlines the importance of permanent residency (PR) as a motive:

> The expansion in overseas student enrolments in the higher education sector appears to be driven by interest on the part of overseas students wishing to obtain PR. This generalization is based on evidence that most of the growth in overseas student enrolments in the higher education sector has occurred in courses which potentially lead to a PR outcome within two years.

These developments suggest that immigration is becoming the dominant factor in the education/ immigration nexus in Australia. It was certainly the primary consideration for Edward and Sandra in their choice of course. Large numbers of international students are attracted to Australia because a tertiary qualification can lead to permanent residency. At the same time, the universities' funding needs have made Australian universities dependent on funding from international students. As a result, students frequently obtain admission to university before their English skills are adequate to the demands of university study.

In most cases, international students who wish to enroll in Australian universities must sit the IELTS test to determine their level of English. University entrance IELTS scores vary dramatically, according to the course and university involved. Few, however, require a score of 7 (Academic), which was the original recommended score for university entrance. Consequently, many students enter university with an inadequate level of English, according to the recommendations of the original designers of the test (Ingram 2005).

Conclusion

There have been a number of changes to policy settings in the General Skilled Migration Program in recent years, particularly with regard to the inclusion (or exclusion) of occupations on the MODL. These changes to policy settings in the area of immigration and international education in Australia have had a profound effect on both students and tertiary institutions. University courses which lead to a PR outcome, such as accountancy, become popular, while enrolments in courses such as Information Technology have dropped sharply because overseas graduates cannot access the MODL without a year's experience working in Australia.

Evidence for the link can be found in an evaluation of the GSM (Birrell et al 2006). In 1999, international students became eligible to migrate on graduation, and from 2001 they were able to be processed onshore if they applied immediately after graduating. These policy changes led to a 30% increase in skilled applications by the start of 2002.

Students do not benefit from premature admission to university or college, other than financially, and nor do the institutions, which struggle to deal with the needs of students with inadequate English skills. Once these students have been allowed to enter college or university, after following procedures stipulated by government or university bodies, their needs should be given more consideration than is currently the case. International students' voices are mostly not heard. They are disadvantaged by their poor English, the stress of having to work and study in a foreign country, and their insecure status in Australia. Their skills may either be wasted (as with Sandra) or acquired only to be discarded later (Edward).

International students provide 25% of funding to universities in Australia (Moodie 2007). Considering their contribution to the society as a source of export income, and the difficulties they face adjusting to another culture and another language, international students deserve special consideration.These students, often with poor English skills, are vulnerable to criticism on that basis. However, they are studying in Australian universities legitimately, as a direct result of government policy, in particular the

transformation of education into a trade commodity. Their aspirations towards immigration are equally legitimate, having been encouraged by government policy.

The impact of the transformation of education into a trade commodity, combined with the linking of immigration and education, has left its mark on all the institutions concerned. At the college level, these factors have led to the phenomenon of visa factories, a derogatory term which refers to unscrupulous colleges that provide minimal tuition at minimal cost for students seeking to prolong their stay in Australia. The existence of such colleges in turn has an effect on colleges operating within the law, whose costs are necessarily higher.

At university level, the effects are more wide-ranging, since universities operate in a global market. Firstly, Australian universities have become dependent on funds generated by international students, a fact which has made them financially vulnerable to any changes in the global market. Secondly, universities in many cases are providing an immigration service for students rather than an educational one. The majority of international students in MODL trade courses, like Edward, do not practice the skills they studied, and indeed the GSM has had a negligible effect on the skills shortage (Birrell 2006). To survive, universities must provide courses on the MODL, but in so doing they are performing a greater service to trade and immigration than to education.

Universities are now vulnerable to Australian policy decisions in both education and immigration, as well as being vulnerable to foreign currency fluctuations or other changes affecting the global education market. For this reason, I would argue that policy links between immigration and education should be severed. When the two are closely linked, the trade in education services becomes, at least for some participants, a trade in permanent residency. Permanent residency is treated as a highly valued commodity. It is so desirable, such a great prize, in fact, that it skews the entire trade in education services. The policy decisions that have given rise to this mercantile approach to immigration should be reversed.

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