

INTERNATIONAL VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING – THE MIGRATION AND LEARNING MIX

Ly Thi Tran¹, Chris Nyland²

¹RMIT University, VIC

²Monash University, VIC

Abstract

This paper draws on interviews with 130 international students and staff from 22 public and private VET providers in New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria. In this article we argue that international VET students have divergent, shifting and in some cases multiple purposes for undertaking their VET courses. These motives may be instrumental and/or intrinsic and can include obtaining permanent residency, accumulating skills that can secure good employment, gaining a foothold that leads to higher education, and/or personal transformation. We suggest, moreover, that students' study purposes and imagining of acquired values are neither fixed nor unitary. They can be shaped and reshaped by their families and personal aspirations and by the social world and the learning environment that they interact with. In particular we argue that whatever a student's study purpose s/he needs to engage in a learning practice and should be provided with a high quality education. Indeed, we insist this remains the case even if students enrol only in order to gain the qualifications needed to migrate. The paper detail the association between migration and learning arguing that the four variations emerging from the empirical data of this study that centre on migration and skills accumulation better explain this association than does the 'international VET students simply want to migrate' perspective. We conclude with a discussion of why the stereotype that holds VET international students are mere 'PR hunters' is unjust and constitutes a threat to the international VET sector.

Key words: VET, international education, migration, study purposes, learning experiences

Introduction

Researchers who have examined the international student experience in Australia have concentrated almost exclusively on university students despite the fact that international vocational education and training (VET) has grown rapidly in recent years. In 2009 this focus was disturbed when the extent to which the VET sector has grown was brought to public attention by the charge that many colleges were catering to students who had enrolled primarily to gain permanent residency (PR) and were producing graduates so poorly trained that they were unable to compete for jobs against domestic students. Evidence that lends support to these charges resulted in the national government revoking the Migration Occupations in Demand List (MODL) and amending the General Skilled Migration Scheme in ways that both limited severely graduates' ability to gain immigrant status and required independent testing of graduates to determine if they have the skills allegedly provided by their course. These regulatory changes were widely applauded but a number of observers warned that highlighting the poor quality of 'dodgy' private colleges risked labelling all international VET students as "PR chasers" who have no real interest in study and hence invariably emerge as poor graduates (Mares 2009).

In this article we assess the validity of the claim that international VET students simply want to migrate and are disinterested in the quality of their education by drawing on interviews with 130 international students, teachers, general staff, directors and CEOs from 22 public and private VET providers in New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria. We argue international VET students have divergent, shifting and in some cases multiple

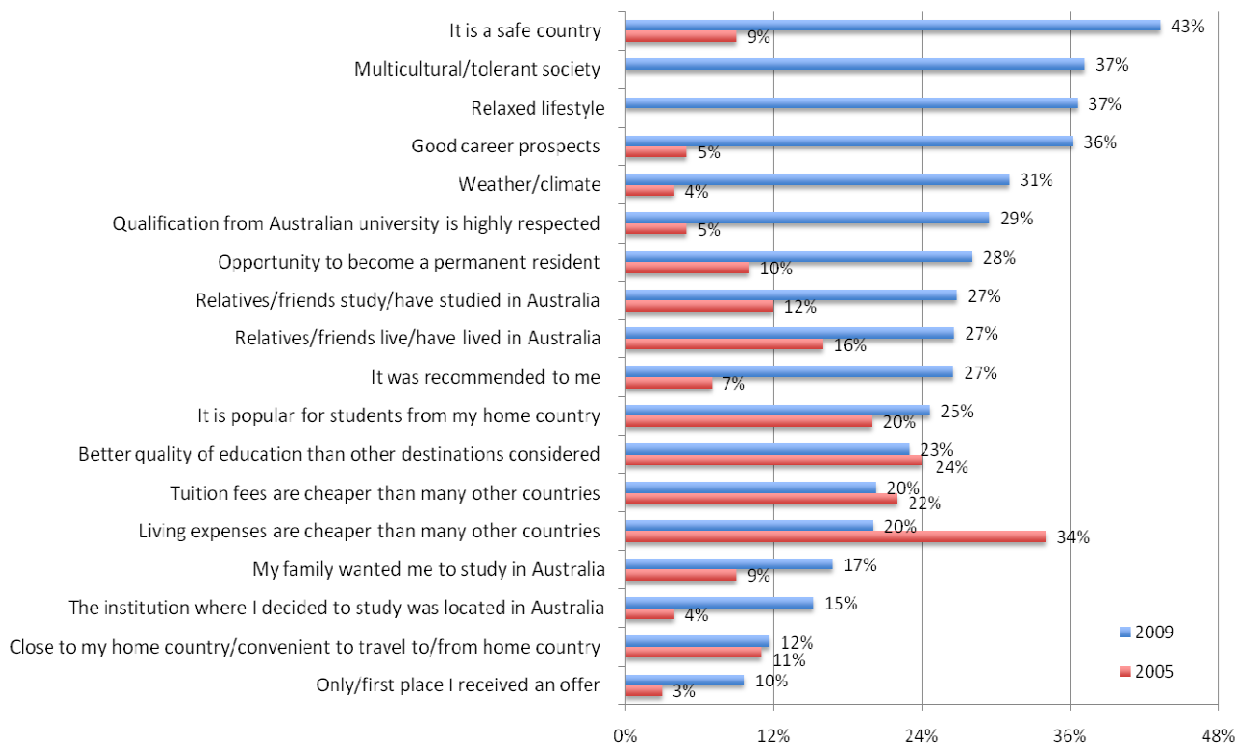
purposes for undertaking their chosen course of study. These motives may be instrumental and/or intrinsic and can include obtaining permanent residency, accumulating skills that can secure good employment, gaining a foothold that leads to higher education, and/or personal transformation. We suggest, moreover, that students' study purposes and imagining of acquired values are neither fixed nor unitary. They can be shaped and reshaped by their families and personal aspirations and by the social world and the learning environment that they interact with. In particular we argue that whatever a student's study purpose s/he needs to engage in a learning practice and should be provided with a high quality education. Indeed, we insist this remains the case even if students enrol only in order to gain the qualifications needed to migrate. Accordingly, it is important that scholars, educators and policy makers have a sound theoretical and empirical understanding of how teachers, the learning environment and pedagogic practices can facilitate international students' engagement in learning and ensure high quality outcomes. The paper begins by introducing the literature that has examined the reasons why international students study in the VET sector. We then proceed to detail the association between migration and learning arguing that the four variations that centre on migration and skills accumulation better explain this association than does the 'international VET students simply want to migrate' perspective. We conclude with a discussion of why the stereotype that holds VET students as mere 'PR hunters' is unjust and constitutes a threat to the international VET sector.

The Literature

Since 2005 VET has been the fastest growing sector of international education in Australia and in August 2009 became the largest by volume of both enrolments and commencements (AEI, 2009a). Asian markets dominate this activity, representing 85.0% of all VET enrolments with India being the lead market with a 29 per cent share followed by China with a share of 7 per cent. 'Management and Commerce' dominated VET international education with 55% per cent of enrolments, 'Food, Hospitality and Personal Services' ranked second with 17 per cent followed by 'Society and Culture' with a contribution of 10 per cent. Most VET enrolments were with non-government providers (84 per cent) and 16 per cent were enrolled in state institutions (AEI, 2009b).

When VET became the largest education exporter this development catalysed speculation that the growth of the sector was being spurred by a rapid increase in the number of institutions that exist primarily to assist individuals attain residency rather than provide a genuine teaching experience, in short, 'PR factories'. This was a charge fed by scholars who highlighted the large number of international students studying hairdressing and cookery (Birrell & Perry 2009; Birrell et al. 2009). These authors claimed that this fast growth is closely associated with the advantage DIAC's Migrant Occupations in Demand List (MODL) accords international students who complete their studies in certain areas of 'Food, Hospitality and Personal Services'. Those who assert immigration is the primary determinant influencing when and what VET international students elect to study can rightly point to quantitative and qualitative data that has shown VET students place great emphasis on the possibility that they might be able to migrate. In 2007 Education International (AEI) reported 51 per cent of VET respondents had reported that the wish to migrate was an important or very important factor influencing their study location decision and 38 per cent conceded a migration agent had been an important 'influencer' assisting them to make the decision as to where and what to study (AEI 2007). In 2010 these findings were reinforced by JWT Education which reported that a survey of university international students had revealed 28 per cent had been influenced in their decision to study in Australia by the hope that they would be able to migrate (see Table One).

Figure One: Factors Considered when Choosing a Country 2005/2009.



Source: JWT Education 2010

That an initial wish to immigrate tends to become manifest in action likely to lead to migration has been made clear in further AEI publications. These include studies that found 81 per cent of VET students intended to find a job in Australia when they completed their course (AEI 2007) and 78 percent of international VET and higher education student respondents approaching the end of their course had either applied for (30%) or planned to apply for (48%) permanent resident status (AEI 2008, 9).

Commentators who emphasize the promise of migration when discussing why VET students study in Australia have also been informed by qualitative data. Notable in this regard is the work of Baas (2006) who draws on 200 interviews with Indian students and host professionals in Melbourne. His basic hypothesis is that Indian students’ “main objective is to obtain a permanent residence visa in Australia and ... they tailor their choice of course and university with this end in mind” (p1). Baas makes it clear he is not suggesting that the majority of Indian students came to Australia simply to gain permanent residency. The first group in his data initially had no intention of migrating or were unaware that this opportunity existed but subsequently became aware the option was a serious possibility. A second group arrived in Australia with the intention of gaining PR or at least a work permit for a couple of years but also wished to gain skills. Both of these two groups were deeply concerned about the quality of the education they received. However, a third and rapidly growing group was focussed only on PR and had little or no concern about education quality except to the extent that this would assist them gain the qualification required to obtain the desired migration points. Although Baas concedes that groups one and two are concerned about the quality of their education the underlying message of his paper is that the key driver is permanent residency and that overall the education received is of marginal significance. This message is

driven home by the minimal attention he accords students' aspiration for skills enhancement, intellectual formation, career advancement and personal enrichment.

The fact that when AEI asked VET international students why they had chosen to study a particular course it had not allowed them the option of identifying migration as an influence has intensified commentators' tendency to focus on the choices students actually make. As a consequence they are all too easily induced to focus on the fact that a significant minority of students study courses that are on the list of occupations that gain maximum migration points but for which there may be little demand in their home country. While this practice is understandable it unfortunately distracts attention from the fact that international VET students overwhelmingly provide answers to why they have chosen their courses similar to those that are key determinants for domestic students. With the latter, primary influences are the possibility of employment advancement, personal aspiration, and opportunity to progress to higher education (Blair et al., 1993, cited in Connelly & Halliday, 2001; Connelly & Halliday, 2001; Maxwell et al, 2000). International VET students, by contrast, report the issues that influence their choice of course include chance of employment (86 per cent), reputation of course (84 per cent), reputation of institution (83 per cent), and cost of course (82 per cent). Moreover, and importantly, nearly all VET respondents (93 per cent) indicate the quality of education is an important or very important motivator (AEI 2007, p.15).

Research on the motivations underlying students' choice of an international education at an Australian University campus in Malaysia shows two forms of investment: positional investments which link to international students' desire to secure better employment opportunities and higher income and self-transformative investments associated with their own expectation to be exposed to a new outlook and new international experience (Pyvis & Chapman, 2007). In particular, recent research has brought a broader lens to the understanding of the motivations and experiences of international students through the concepts of investment and imagined community (e.g. Norton, 2001; Norton & Toohey 2002; Arkoudis & Love, 2008). Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of 'cultural capital', Norton and Toohey (2002) argue that why and how learners invest in their course links to their desire to 'acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which in turn increase the value of their cultural capital' (p.122). Their argument underpins the connection of students' investment in a specific course, their purposes for so doing and their adaptation. This important relationship has however been mainly examined in the context of learners in English as a second language or English for Academic Purposes courses and has gone largely unexplored in the literature on international students in Australia and overseas. The concept of investment focuses on the agency of the learner as a complex and mobile social history with multiple values who has the capacity to organise and reorganise a sense of place and value in the social world (Arkoudis & Love, 2008). However, the discussion of VET international students' study purposes so far has made sweeping generalizations and implies uniformity in relation to why and how international students study in VET providers. Analysing the link between students' values and purpose of investing in their course and their learning experiences will offer an alternative conceptual view from which to examine international students' learning adaptation and provide new and deeper insights into their learning practices in VET.

In sum, what the literature suggests is that even if the course chosen by a VET student is influenced by a wish to migrate, it is highly likely the student will also be swayed by the desire for a positive learning experience. Highlighting this revelation is of the greatest importance. For if educators and policy makers mistakenly believe VET international students have enrolled merely to meet migration requirements they are unlikely to provide the

commitment and resources individuals deserve both as students and customers. In the next section of the paper we draw on the voices of VET international students to clarify the association between migration and learning.

International students' study purposes and learning experience

The argument underlying this paper is supported by interviews with 130 international students, teachers, support staff, international program managers and CEOs from 22 VET providers in NSW, QLD and VIC. The majority of student interviewees were from India and China which represent the two largest source countries in the VET sector (AEI, 2010). For a small number of student participants who were interviewed during their first two weeks following enrolment, a second round of interviews were conducted at the end of their first semester. The purpose of the second interview was to gain insight into how students are transformed in the process of adapting to the learning practices of their VET courses. The first named author of this paper also stays in touch with the participants after the interviews via email and telephone. She has also taken part in student activities, visited their homes and workplaces and participated in their workshops, practice and theory classes in order to observe and understand the multiple dimensions of international students' life and study in Australia.

The data generated by the interviews uncovered four variations of the complex relationship between permanent residency and international students' motives in undertaking VET courses: some students are motivated to enrol in a VET course by a dual desire to secure PR and attain the skills associated with their chosen occupation, a second group views migration as a 'second chance opportunity', a third sees PR as the sole reason to enrol in VET course and the fourth have no interest in gaining PR or have lost any interest they may once have had. In addition, as with domestic students the data reveals personal interest, personal aspiration and the possibility of using VET as a pathway to university or employment in their home country is important to many international students. In short, the data shows that while migration is a motivator for many students it is not present to the extent that has been suggested by numerous media commentators and by some academics.

Obtaining skills-qualifications and PR

Many interviewees were enrolled in their VET course because they wanted to secure both PR and the qualifications needed to be successful in their chosen occupation. For example a Filipino student enrolled in commercial cookery with a state training provider advised:

First of all, I am very interested in cooking, that's my love, my passion... And the course is also a stepping stone for permanent residency. My love for cooking makes me really interested in the course right now and the PR gives me the will to survive, it gives me the drive to try harder (Filipino, Hospitality, TAFE, VIC)

This student explicitly expresses that both her passion for cooking and her desire to migrate to Australia are significant elements motivating her to study in the VET sector. During the interview she emphasized how her passion for her chosen occupation and her determination to secure permanent residency provide her with the strength to overcome the emotional hardship of leaving her son behind with her parents in the Philippines and the need to juggle a part-time job and study. The student positions herself as being ready and empowered to respond to the challenging educational experiences she must confront in Australia and reveals that along with her desire to secure permanent residency she is also driven by the wish to fulfil her occupational aspiration.

Many other students when asked why they had enrolled in their VET course replied they wanted both permanent residency and work skills and qualifications and in so doing observed that they did not accept these two objectives were in conflict:

To be a cabinet maker and to do a trade but it's not so easy to get an apprenticeship in Germany as a girl. So I came to Australia. And of course, I also want to immigrate (German, Cabinet making, TAFE, QLD).

The main reason is for getting permanent residency because I've been in Australia for two years like on holiday visas, working holiday. And then at the end of that I went back to England in July last year and there's not much happening in England and I wanted to come back to Australia... And I thought I wanted to do a course that is going to give me something at the end of it, not just come for no reason. I want to enroll in something that is going to get me a job. So I looked into doing mechanics automotive. And yeah, I want to get permanent residency at the end so I can stay over here. It's good fun. Yeah that's one of the reasons I took the course *because so I've always been around cars since I was little* and then so yeah. (England, Automotive, TAFE, QLD).

From the first, these students had chosen an Australian VET course in the hope of attaining permanent residency and of gaining the skills and qualifications required to pursue their chosen occupation. In short, throughout their period of study both *positional investments* and *self-transformative investments* have been of importance (Pyvis & Chapman, 2007).

Permanent residency as a 'second chance opportunity'

For other students permanent residency was a prize that began to be sought only after their studies in Australia had commenced:

Now since I've been here for nearly one year and I quite like here. If I can, I would like to apply for permanent residency. Before I came here I had no idea whether I am going to like this place or not because I've never been overseas. It is my first time. I'd never been out of my province in the South of China, near to Hong Kong. (Chinese, Hospitality, TAFE, NSW).

At that time [when the student decided to take the course], I did not think about PR, if now I can't take it, no problem, I can go back to my country and use my knowledge from here. I will try for that [for PR], if I could get it, it's good, if I don't get it, it's ok... I come here to study. I don't come here for PR. (Indian, Hospitality, Private college, QLD).

These students revealed that when they came to Australia, immigration opportunities were of little importance but as they progressed through their course they began to find the possibility of PR attractive. This commonly occurs because the student becomes immersed in the migration culture through interacting with peers who are applying for or have successfully gained PR. Commenting on the students who come to desire PR after arrival in Australia Bass (2006, p.11) acknowledges some of these individuals progress along this path because they find the Australian social and natural environment attractive. However, he downplays the significance of this influence and instead elects to highlight the extent to which students develop an interest in PR because they see it as a 'form of compensation' for an unsatisfactory education experience. By so doing he both denigrates the quality of education in Australia and conveys the impression that these 'dissatisfied customers' constitute a very large proportion of those who learn to desire PR. By contrast, none of our student interviewees voiced this perspective. Rather, they invariably reported they had come

to find PR attractive either because they like Australia or because they learn PR can be gained at little cost and consequently is a windfall prize one would be foolish not to seize.

In particular, some students highlight since they are interested in gaining some international working experience (in this case working experience in a context other than their home country), obtaining PR gives them access to the job market in Australia as an international context. They mention that a PR is often listed as the first criterion in most job descriptions, thereby becoming necessary for them if they wish to apply for a job in Australia after graduation. This group of students also differ from the groups described above because while international students in other PR-oriented groups views migration as an *outcome* of their study in Australia, PR is seen as an '*opportunity*' for this group. In this case, the acquired values that international students attached to their study in Australia are not fixed and limited to common values such as the enhancement of skills and employment advancement but have been extended to include migration. This reflects the flexible response of international students as a mobile population, to the Australian government's policy on skilled migration and the potential for PR that they have become aware of.

Initially motivated to secure PR but later on change their mind

The number of interviewees not interested in migration was also boosted by those students who initially enrolled in a VET course in order to gain PR but decided subsequently that this was not an option they wished to pursue.

Well, when I first came to Australia two years ago, I definitely thought I was going to live in this country forever... Now I am thinking I'm still young and there are so many opportunities around the world. I am going to travel around the world and actually live in different countries (Korean, Hospitality, TAFE, NSW).

At the very beginning I wanted to live in Australia...Yeah and now I don't show much interest about a PR because I could very easily move to America, and I think that maybe fit me better... (Chinese, Hospitality, TAFE, QLD)

These students initially saw PR as an important outcome of their study in Australia but positioned themselves as globally mobile individuals as they came to recognise the options made possible by globalisation. For some, this change emerged from their growing confidence in themselves and the skills they acquire. Indeed, many students in commercial cookery and hairdressing reported that they had enrolled because they wish to gain qualifications in an internationally mobile field in order to gain a 'global passport' that will enable them to work and settle in multiple countries. For others, Australia was initially seen as a promising land but along the way they had realised the lifestyle does not well suit them. Thus this study shows that international students' imagining of the acquired values they wish to pursue via international education is neither fixed nor unitary but can be shaped and reshaped by their changing perspectives, their learning experiences and the external environment with which they interact.

PR Chasing

Our interviews confirmed that there are international students who enrol in VET courses in which they have no interest other than the fact that they can generate the points required to immigrate. This was confirmed by student interviewees who commented on fellow students:

So of course I do my own reading and my own research. And so when the teacher is teaching, you know a lot more compared to someone who's not very interested and

doesn't make any effort... They're here mainly for PR in the end. Yeah. So they just come, take their time. You can see the attitude. Like they're not always on time for class. They don't participate in class. Whether they pass or not doesn't matter. You know that kind of attitude? Yeah. And then they didn't pay attention when the teacher is talking. All they want to do is, oh, let's just take the notes or let's just pass the test. (Malaysian, Bakery, Private college, VIC)

Other interviewees conceded that immigration was the sole reason they had chosen their course but in so doing highlighted the fact that this did not mean these students would not work in the relevant industry:

I enrolled in this course for immigration... No. I didn't like bakery. Now I just feel, have a little bit feeling [toward bakery]. So it's basically like people have contact with something for a long time and they have emotion on it... I just learn yeah it is because I said if I want to reach my PR purpose, my goal, I have to get the certificate. How can I get it? I must finish all the courses. So I have to finish all the courses and that's it. And how did I finish all the courses? Just following the teacher and listened. So I followed teachers' instructions and do the assignments and finish exams. And that's it, finish. And now I reach my goals, I succeed (Chinese, Bakery, TAFE, VIC).

Indeed, other interviewees who had enrolled solely in order to gain migration points reported that their teachers had generated in them a genuine interest in the occupation.

I was very bored in cooking. And I am scared at how can I go through this course because I never done any cooking before. But the method and the method of teaching and teachers are so good that now I am feeling very confident to cooking and I can work in the industry also. I enjoy everything. I enjoy most every day. Every hour, I enjoy... They [the teachers] are taking care all the time. They are pushing students, pushing for the whole of the students. And they always checking their students are taking the skills or not. They are very friendly and they are helping but at the same time they are strict also. They don't let you go for a single time... I want to be a chef. *It's my dream now* (Indian, Cookery, TAFE, QLD)

This course will help me to get the PR... No in China I even don't know how to fry an egg. And my teacher, whose name is Mark, he's very nice and he's a very good teacher... Yeah, he changed me, he changed me a lot. He makes me like cooking... Because he's very friendly and his class style is very funny and active. He's very patient to teach us how to cook. Even when we make a mistake and he will help us to get through it. (Chinese, Cookery, TAFE, QLD)

These excerpts reveal that it is the teachers and VET providers that play an important role in making students interested and engaged in the learning. Connelly and Halliday (2001) argue that VET teachers should be responsible for taking students beyond mere instrumentalism and facilitating their engagement in learning. The students' views in this study highlight the significance of teachers' capacity to identify the study purposes of international students and their approaches to engaging students in the learning process and generating the interest of international students in the subjects, which were originally seen by international students themselves as nothing other than a means to migration. In dealing with this group of students, undoubtedly teachers' perceptions of their role and their attitudes towards this responsibility are the key to nurturing students' interest in learning, enabling them to move beyond instrumentalism and seeing migration only as an end goal, to being motivated to develop

vocational skills. In doing so, the teachers play an important role in legitimising student participation in the learning practices (Wenger, 1998). On the other hand, as revealed by some students in this study, some teachers' sweeping generalisations of all international students as solely motivated by the desire to secure PR while overlooking their genuine interest in the course can lead to destructive attitudes and associated implications that negatively impact on international students' learning in VET courses and the teaching of the international student cohorts.

Suggesting that it is possible for teachers to inspire students who enroll in a subject in which they have no interest to become interested is not to suggest that this is an outcome that can be achieved with all or even most students. To suggest otherwise is to place demands on teachers that are simply unreasonable and unrealistic. Indeed it is a step bound to encourage 'teacher bashing'. Such a step would be particularly unjust in the case with teachers who are compelled labour in colleges that are grossly understaffed and underequipped. In short, teachers who are must work in "PR factories" as described by one student interviewee:

Every time when you finish your work you have to show it to teacher and then you have to get the signature otherwise without that signature, you did nothing, but to get signature you have to wait so many hours. Busy. Teachers are just like screaming and running. They're also got stressed as well and the teachers would regularly change [resign]. I don't think that they really want to teach the students because they thought they just waste their energy and stuff. One day I said like, "I have done this can you just sign it and check it for me?" And the teacher would say, "Okay, do you want to be a hair designer or you just want to stay here?" And I said, "I just want to stay here." And she rolled her eyes and said, "Okay, pass." (Japanese, Hairdressing Private college, VIC)

The private hairdressing college in which this student enrolled was the cheapest in Melbourne and recruited large numbers of international students even though it had only two teachers. There were often more than 50 students in one class and it is to the teacher's enormous credit that she asked her question and did not simply assume all her students who enrolled in a cheap course did so because they only wanted PR. But to expect that this teacher should act differently when confronted by a student that tells that she has no interest in the course than she did would be unjust.

Accumulation of skills and qualifications

A significant number of interviewees viewed their enrolment in VET solely as a means to gain the skills and qualifications required to pursue their chosen occupation and/or as a pathway to personal development. These students deemed PR an irrelevancy or at most a fringe benefit that might be garnered simply because it is a 'low hanging fruit' if not a windfall. For example, a Thai student explained why he had chosen to study hospitality management at a state Technical and Further Education (TAFE) college:

I'm willing to do it because I love what I do... I mean I know I will be eligible for PR but I am not focusing into it. I am not crazy all over it because I think that is the bonus to my part. But my main point is I have to keep myself focused on my career, profession, refining my skills and that's the most important (Thai, Hospitality management, TAFE, NSW).

This student worked as a pastry chef in his home country and the US before enrolling in a diploma in hospitality management. He is motivated to study because he wishes to upgrade his skills and enhance his ability to secure rewarding and challenging employment in this chosen occupation. The following excerpts from interviews with cookery students offer

further insight into the reasons why international students who are committed primarily to accumulating skills or qualifications would invest in a VET course:

First of all, I am very interested in cookery. Second, I want to set up my own business of commercial cookery. Before I graduated from the university, to open a coffee shop or restaurant was my dream... Then if I get a chance, I want to open a restaurant or a coffee shop. It doesn't have to be big. I really enjoyed so when I came here, the course is very good and everything is what I want. (Chinese, Cookery, TAFE, NSW).

I found if I combine Korean cuisine with the Western cuisine it will rock in this country and anywhere in the world. Because many Koreans have come here and they are doing their restaurants, and it's all just plain Korean and many of the places are not good. My goal is actually to raise that standard by combining these stuffs. Actually, there is a chef from Belgium who is actually doing it. So maybe I can learn from him (Korean, Cookery, TAFE, NSW).

Birrell et al (2009) asserted that international students were willing to pay for a cookery course since this provided them with a pathway to migration to Australia. In their latter paper, Birrell and Perry (2009) further argue that as international students can potentially earn at a minimal level if they return to work in their home country such as India with a VET cooking credential, their investment purpose in Australian education must be to secure permanent residency. Clearly while this may be the case for a number of international students enrolled in VET, the above quotes from international students' interviews show that international students are prepared to pay for their course because many of them are not only genuinely interested in the trade and becoming a cook but also desire to fulfil their dream of running their own commercial cookery business. For a number of the interviewees who prioritised the accumulation of skills a VET course is valued because it provides qualifications they can take to their home country:

Before I studied at RMIT, I specialised in Business and then I studied that one year. And the purpose I moved to hospitality because you know, when I come into Australia I started work in the hospitality industry. And truly, I fell in love. I love to deal with customer. And also like because you know, in Vietnam tourism and hospitality is growing up very fast. And in the next ten years we enjoy different thing. That's why, that's the purpose I want to take this course to get the knowledge about hospitality, management or the skill how to become a good manager. (Vietnamese, Hospitality, Private college, VIC)

This industry in my country is not very developed. So that's the main purpose of my study here in Australia. I don't really have intentions of staying here. So yeah, basically that's it (Mexican, TAFE, NSW, Horticulture).

I want to work there and make the system much better because our government is spending billions of dollars for the betterment of the people. But still we do have malaria cases existing in our country. There are hundreds of these small diseases which are still existing in my country. So like government is spending on the top billions of dollars but here it is not reaching at the bottom level to the people who really require that... So I want to become a part of this system.... So that's why I wanted to have some formal education so I came here. I joined the community welfare course. So right now I'm pursuing it. And as soon as I'll finish that, then I may go back to country and join that health system in our country (Indian, TAFE, NSW, community welfare)

These students enrolled in an Australian VET course because they wish to gain skills and qualifications that would enable them to contribute to both their personal success at home and the development of their country. They commonly identified problems that need to be tackled in their homeland and suggested that by returning with their new skills they would be able to help ease these problems. Others referred to emerging industries at home and the consequent growing demand for workers with an international education and qualifications. In brief, these students have pursued their VET course with a particular employment outcome and particular vision for their future that assumes they will be returning to their homeland.

VET as a pathway to higher education

Many interviewees reported they were undertaking a VET course with the expectation this would provide them with a pathway to university:

It is because I am very interested in game design. This course in this TAFE can be connected to another university, called UTS. The game design course in UTS only accepts people who finish from this course. (Chinese, TAFE, NSW)

Well first, I wanted to be bilingual in English... I have to be bilingual and maybe this course will help me to get into a university. If I can hopefully get a bit of money before and I can maybe enrol for one year or two years in a university. So I think that is a good way to stay, to get a diploma and to have access then later to uni. And if not, I can still go back home and have a diploma I can start to find a job as well. So yeah and I like the fact that it's not as hard as uni, it's a bit more relaxed. (French, Communication and media, TAFE, NSW)

For many students, a VET credential is significantly less valued in their home country than a university degree. Therefore it is common that their parents expect them to obtain a higher education qualification in the end or they themselves are committed to doing so. Student interviewees provided a number of reasons why they used VET as a pathway to higher education. For the majority of this group, VET is their preferred choice because they cannot afford the fees universities charge and they hope their VET qualifications will enable them to gain a job that will generate the income they need to work their way through university. Others could not meet the IELTS (International English Language Testing System) requirement for university entrance and viewed the VET course as a means to improve their English and/or earn university entrance by completing a course that is taught in English.

Conclusion

International students who enrol in VET courses in order to gain PR act in a manner that is totally reasonable for they are seeking to win a goal that would transform their lives. Moreover, the fact that thousands of international students would be drawn to courses that earn extra migration points tended to be foreseen by relevant officials and industry representatives. If any criticism is warranted it needs to target the regime in which migration was poorly linked to education and in which regulations were inadequately enforced. This system created a situation that has engendered enormous difficulties for thousands of international students and generated the image that all such students are simply PR hunters. The data presented in this paper has shown this is not the case and highlights the inadequacy of the manner in which the governance of the sector has been conducted. It also highlights the fact that great costs have imposed on all VET international students. Those who enrolled solely to gain an education have had the reputation of their qualifications besmirched and devalued and because of the spill-over effect this situation applies to all VET courses and not

only those that were high demand such as cooking and hairdressing. Those who wished to gain qualifications and migrate have been doubly damaged for not only has the value of their qualification been tarnished, in many cases they have lost the chance to migrate that they were led to believe was a serious possibility. Finally, and likewise the PR hunters have doubly lost for they too have forfeited their chance at immigration and gained a much devalued qualifications that at some time they may have wished to utilise.

Numerous recent articles in the media and the publications by some academics have constructed the image of international students as ‘PR hunters’, which then is often seen to have negative impact on their learning. At the same time international students’ interest in the acquisition of skills, their dream for professional advancement and their aspiration for self-transformation seem to be ignored in recent media discussions as well as most current research on international VET students. The popularisation of international VET students as PR hunters who have little or no interest in receiving a high quality education has also imposed and/or self-imposed serious costs on the sector itself. Without the protectionism provided by the migration-education link the sector will find it difficult to market courses that have been devalued and stereotyped as low quality. In the context created by the 2010 amendments to the migration regulations the sector will need to build an image that is based on an ability to provide a high quality learning experience and consciously address destructive ways of conceptualizing international students. As the excerpts from the interviews with VET international students provided in this paper have revealed these students are vibrant and mobile people who act on their dreams for the future and are motivated by multiple, differing and shifting aims. Their imagining about who they are in the future and about the potential future opportunities has motivated them to invest in the VET courses and perhaps to be prepared to negotiate the complexities arising from studying in an unfamiliar environment and in a language that they are less confident with. In short, these are the type of people Australia needs as migrants and consequently the VET sector has a responsibility to ensure that it rebuilds its image and more fully develops its capacity to enable these students to express their agency in productive and fulfilling ways, to be engaged in an effective learning environment and to realise their dreams.

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