

International Students in a Foreign Discourse

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Abstract

Exporting education has played a major part in the services sector of English-speaking countries, such as America, Canada, United Kingdom, New Zealand and Australia. In Australia, despite of the government policies oriented to attracting international students to invest for their education in Australia, some ideological construction of racism is imbricated within the structure of an official DIMA (Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs) document. A key part of this official policy lies in its assessment levels on financial capacities in the processing of international student visa applications for access to an Australian education. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is employed on the language used in looking at different financial requirements for students from different countries. Evidence of racial ideology is manifested in an asymmetrical power discourse in Australia between the (white) law-makers and international students from developing countries, especially from Asian countries, from which the majority of international students originate. The conclusion reveals that racial prejudice continues to be imbricated within friendly educational discourse of Australia.

Key words: *International student, culture, discourse, curriculum, acculturation*

Introduction

Over the past two decades, increasing numbers of international students have come to Australia. In 2000, there were 153,372 international students enrolled in Australia (DEST, 2005). And these international students generated \$3.7 billion for the Australian economy (AEI, 2001). Exporting education has played a major part of Australian services trade, especially in Asia, from which the majority of international students originate. In 2002, China first surpassed Malaysia in student numbers studying in the Australian tertiary education system (AVCC, 2005) and became the largest country of origin of international students of the Australian education sector. By accepting increasing numbers of international students, Australia has become more widely recognised in the arena of international education, and is regarded as a safe, friendly study destination with high quality courses, according to Mr. Alexander Downer, the former Minister for Foreign Affairs (2005). However, some latent superiority sentiments and attitudes persist, resonating beneath the surface of this “friendly study destination” in the predominant ‘white’ Australian society.

Commonly, the use of the term of ‘racism’ is regarded as a form of violence, particularly through verbal or physical abuse. Racism can also refer to ethnic domination in cosmopolitan societies such as the USA and Australia (Van, 1993). “The people who practise this racism believe in or/and uphold the basic values of democratic egalitarianism, and would emphatically deny that they are ‘racist’. Nevertheless they would speak or act in such a way that distances themselves from the ethnic minority, engaging in discursive strategies that blame the victims for their circumstances on their own social, economic and even cultural disadvantage’ (Teo, 2000). This form of racism is prevalent in some official policies of the DIMA in exporting education. The discourse in the DIMA document regarding assessment levels of financial proof in student visa processing can be used as an instrument to exert ideological dominance in the recruitment of international students. This variation of racism is embedded in such larger, but less transparent structure of power discourse that disguised dominance in naturalized discourse.

Then how do discursive strategies, as expressed in this Commonwealth Government policy, work in practice as a form of unegalitarianism? DIMA is the main policy-maker and policy-enforcer in the field

of migration and education exports in Australia, i.e. it plays a key function in dealing with multicultural issues in the domestic and international spheres. DIMA performs this function for all migration into or out of Australia and thus is a prime influence (even 'control') on all aspects of the society economic, educational, religious, artistic, sporting, and the like. Therefore, in this sense, this document chosen from DIMA has strong significance or persuasiveness. Before the discursive strategies are dealt with, it is necessary to briefly describe the contemporary Australian education export.

Australian education export

Despite being an early player in the education export industry, today Australia has become the largest provider per head of population, and the third largest English-speaking provider of international education services, with seven per cent of the market, behind the USA (32 per cent) and the UK (15 per cent). The industry is now Australia's third largest service export industry (Kenyon & Koshy, 2003). Kenyon and Koshy (2003) also estimate that incoming international students spent \$5.2 billion in 2002 on tuition fees, goods and services, and that the economic activity this generated had an employment impact of about 42,650 jobs.

During the past two decades, increasing numbers of international students have come to Australia. In 2000, there were 153,372 international students enrolled in Australia (DEST, 2005). In 2003-04, a total of 171,616 visas were granted to international students representing an increase of 5.6 per cent over the previous year. Applicants holding a passport from the following places were the major source of offshore student visa grants: the People's Republic of China (10%), the United States (6.2%), India (5.6%), Republic of Korea (4.8%), Malaysia (4.1%), Japan (3.9%), Hong Kong SAR (3.2%), Indonesia (3%), Thailand (2.9%) and Singapore (2.2%), Vietnam showed a significant increase in offshore student visa grants (0.8%). These figures show that students from the ten Asian countries cited above account for 40.5% of all international students in Australia (DIMA). The foregoing data also show that the increasing trend in numbers of international students still remains strong. To sum up, in order to export education, Australia has been forging active links with other countries, especially in Asia, which is the primary export market.

Visa policies on financial capacities

International education became part of Australia's geo-political positioning after World War II (Poole, 2004). In the last 20 years, trans-national education has become a global phenomenon, fuelled by many forces. These include the globalisation of trade and communications, internationalisation of labour markets, declines in the costs of international travel and communications, and growth in the numbers who can afford to obtain better educational opportunities than previous generations. Governments are more actively promoting the international mobility of students and teachers for a mix of cultural, political, labour market and trade reasons.

The Australian education export industry today owes its genesis to the Australian Government's initiative in 1986 to open Australian education to full-fee paying international students (AEI, 2001). With respect to the recruitment of full-fee paying international students, DIMA set up a series of policies to ensure that all the international student visa applicants would have sufficient financial capacity to support them while studying and living in Australia. The regulations are formulated for international student visa applicants as follows:

- You will need to show that you have enough money to pay for living expenses, education costs and travel for the duration of the course.
- You will need to show that you have enough money for you, your spouse and all of your children aged under 18 years, whether or not they will be coming to Australia with you.
- Your visa subclass and assessment level determines how you will need to prove your capacity to meet your financial requirements. (DIMA, 2005)

These descriptions reveal that international student visa applicants not only need to show that they can afford their cost of living, education and travel but those of their immediate family if applicable, whether or not they will be coming to Australia. More importantly how much funds they need depends

on their “visa subclass and assessment level”. Before presenting this key part of the policy, i.e. assessment levels, it is necessary to consider what ‘visa subclasses’ are (see Table 1):

Table 1: Visa subclass

If the main course you will be studying is a(n)...	Then you can apply for a Student visa, subclass...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS), undertaken as a stand-alone course, not leading to an Australian award or • ELICOS undertaken as a stand-alone course, leading to a certificate I, II, III or IV, 	... 570 - Independent ELICOS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • primary school course • secondary school course, including junior and senior secondary or • approved secondary exchange program, 	... 571 - Schools
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • certificate I, II, III, and IV (except ELICOS) • diploma • advanced diploma • vocational graduate certificate or • vocational graduate diploma. Note: Former RATE system qualifications: Certificate, Advanced certificate and Associate diploma, 	... 572 - Vocational Education and Training
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • bachelor degree • associate degree • graduate certificate • graduate diploma or • masters coursework, 	... 573 - Higher Education
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • masters research or • doctoral degree 	... 574 - Postgraduate Research
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • enabling course: non-award foundation studies or • other full-time course or components of 	... 575 - Non-award

courses not leading to an Australian award,	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • full-time courses of any type undertaken by an AusAID or • Defence student sponsored by the Australian Government, 	... 576 - AusAID

(DIMA, 2005)

By browsing the form, it can be seen that there are seven visa subclasses, in which, generally speaking, Subclass 570 is for language learning, Subclass 571 is for primary and secondary schools, Subclass 572 for TAFE, Subclass 573 for coursework degrees and Subclass 574 for research degrees, Subclass 575 is non-award courses and Subclass 576 can be any type sponsored by AusAID or the defence Department. However it is difficult to get sponsorship by the Australian Government as funding is limited and highly competitive. From the data provided by Overview – Australia’s Student Visa Program of DIMA (2005), it can be seen that the majority of international students come from Subclass 572, 573, 574.

DIMA also identifies four assessment levels by countries as a way to determine what materials student visa applicants need to provide in order to meet the relative financial requirements according to their visa subclasses. Table 2 describes what financial requirements are in student visa assessment.

Table 2: Visa assessment

If your assessment level is ...	Then you will need to ...
1,	... declare that you have access to enough money to meet the minimum financial requirements in the Student visa application form
2,	show that you have access to the minimum financial requirements for the first 12 months of your stay in Australia declare that you have access to the minimum financial requirements for the remainder of your stay in Australia. Note: Although non-cash assets are not directly acceptable, it is possible to either: liquidate the assets prior to applying for a student visa, depositing the money you receive in a bank or use the assets as collateral for a loan from a financial institution
3,	show that you have access to the minimum financial requirements from an acceptable source for the first 24 months of your stay in Australia declare that you have access to the minimum financial requirements for the remainder of your stay in Australia Exception: If you are applying for a subclass 574 (Postgraduate Research sector) visa, you will need to show that you have access to the minimum financial requirements from an acceptable source for:

	at least the period of any preliminary course and the first 12 months of your principal course
4,	show that you have access to the minimum financial requirements from an acceptable source for the first 36 months of your stay in Australia declare that you have access to the minimum financial requirements for the remainder of your stay in Australia Exception: If you are applying for a subclass 574 (Postgraduate Research sector) visa, you will need to show that you have access to the minimum financial requirements from an acceptable course for: at least the period of any preliminary course the first 12 months of your principal course

Source: (DIMA, 2005)

The bases for these assessment levels are unstated or unexplained, in the DIMA documents. Nevertheless, what can be easily perceived is that:

- The countries on Level 3 in most subclasses (for a total of 29): Bangladesh, Bhutan, Burma, Cuba, Ecuador, Fiji, Ghana, India, Iran, Jordan, Kenya, Kiribati, Laos, Maldives, Mongolia, Nauru, Nepal, Nigeria, Philippines, Russian Federation, Samoa Western, Solomon Islands, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, Turkey, Tuvalu, Vietnam, Zambia and Zimbabwe
- The countries on Level 4 in most subclasses (for a total of 4): Cambodia, China (excl. SARs and Taiwan), Lebanon and Pakistan

The geographic distribution of these countries is as follows:

- 24 Asian countries: Cambodia, China (excl. SARs and Taiwan), Lebanon, Pakistan (all of Level 4 countries come from Asian), Bangladesh, Bhutan, Burma, Fiji, India, Iran, Jordan, Kiribati, Laos, Maldives, Mongolia, Nauru, Nepal, Philippines, Samoa Western, Solomon Islands, Sri Lanka, Turkey, Tuvalu, Vietnam.
- 6 African countries: Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Tanzania, Zambia, Zimbabwe
- 2 Latin Americans: Cuba, Ecuador
- 1 European: Russian Federation

A majority of the countries in Level 3 and 4 are in Asia. Ironically, 'Asia is Australia's most important regional market for education exports, and will continue to provide unprecedented opportunities for Australia, as Asian incomes grow and higher education takes on increasing prominence.' according to Dr Brendan Nelson (2005), former Minister of the DIMA. He then continued 'In terms of international student spending, Australia's top eight markets measured on fees are in Asia. China is Australia's largest source of foreign students with almost 70,000 students enrolled in Australian institutions in 2004.'

In terms of the students from these countries, an additional requirement is made for them with regard to acceptable financial sources. Table 3 describes acceptable sources for the funding if their assessment levels are 3 or 4.

Table 3

Assessment level	The funds to support you and your family members can come from ...
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a money deposit with a financial institution held by you or an individual providing support to you for at least 3 consecutive months immediately before the date of your visa application • a loan from a financial institution made to you or an individual providing support to you • a loan from the government of your home country • your proposed education provider • the Commonwealth of Australia or an Australian State or Territory government • the government of a foreign country • a provincial or state government of a foreign country that has the written support of the national government of the foreign country • a corporation • an organisation gazetted by the Minister • an acceptable non-profit organisation • a multilateral agency. Examples: United Nations, World Bank or Asian Development Bank.
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a money deposit with a financial institution that has been held for at least 6 consecutive months immediately before the date of your visa application by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ you ○ your spouse ○ your brother or sister ○ your parents ○ your grandparents ○ your aunt or uncle (only if they are usually resident in Australia and either a citizen/permanent resident of Australia or an eligible New Zealand citizen). • a loan from a financial institution made to (and in the name of): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ you ○ your spouse ○ your brother or sister ○ your parents ○ your grandparents ○ your aunt or uncle (only if they are usually resident in Australia and either a citizen/permanent resident of Australia or an eligible New Zealand citizen).

	<p style="text-align: center;">Zealand citizen).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a loan from the government of your home country • your proposed education provider • the Commonwealth of Australia or an Australian State or Territory government • the government of a foreign country • a provincial or state government of a foreign country that has the written support of the national government of the foreign country • a corporation • an organisation gazetted by the Minister • an acceptable non-profit organisation • a multilateral agency. <p style="text-align: center;">Examples: United Nations, World Bank or Asian Development Bank</p>
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Foreign discourse and racism

Discourse analysis is often defined as the analysis of language 'beyond the sentence'. By examining specific language used in a discourse, people can see how dominance and inequality are enacted and reproduced in the social and political context; eventually realizing the way social power is abused. Teo (2000) then states: 'thus, by analysing the linguistic structures and discourse strategies in the light of their interactional and wider social contexts, we can unlock the ideologies and recover the social meanings expressed in discourse'. Van Dijk (1993, 1996) and Faircough (1992, 1995) share a common vision of the centrality of language as a means of social construction.

Australian education discourse is unfamiliar and foreign to international students in Australia and it is likely to make a great impact in the way they study and live in Australia. The analysis of this discourse in terms of DIMA policy will facilitate better understanding of the ideology on social structures and relationships. Some words used in the policy are sketched under linguistic analysis, with a focus on particular discursive strategies that have the potential to harbour ideological meaning. In so doing, I hope to gradually reveal the construction of a racial ideology embedded within its structure.

In a linguistic perspective, we can find that on Level 1 in Table 2 there is no requirement for financial proof, just a requirement to 'declare'. However, on Level 2, it changes into '**show** that you have access to the minimum financial requirements for the first **12 months** of your stay in Australia', which is written in block. And then on Level 3 it shifts to '**show... and 24 months**' and on Level 4 '**show... and 36 months**' both of which are written in block. The increasing months can only give one implication, i.e. of decreasing credibility or sense of trust towards these international student visa applicants. The similar difference also appears between Level 2 and Level 3 and 4. On Level 2, the requirement only states to '**show** that you have access to the minimum financial requirements for the first **12 months** of your stay in Australia', but On Level 3 and 4, 'an acceptable source' is added to it. That phrase implies some financial sources are not accepted or 'we' do not trust other sources in the countries on Level 3 and 4. What is more, between Level 3 and Level 4 in Table 3, in the delimitation of 'an acceptable source', there are still two disparities. One shows that on Level 3 one item states 'a money deposit with a financial institution held by **an individual** providing support to ...', while on Level 4 it changes into 'a money deposit with a financial institution that has been held ...by **you/your spouse/your brother or sister/your parents/your grandparents/your aunt or uncle (only if they are usually resident in Australia and either a citizen/permanent resident of Australia or an eligible New Zealand citizen)**' which means DIMA only trusts people listed above as an acceptable financial supply sources. Another example appears that on Level 3, a money deposit is required for at least '**3** consecutive months immediately before the date of your visa application', but on Level 4, the corresponding requirement turns to be 'at least **6** consecutive months'. The discourse expressed in

the language reveals that the degree of credibleness is set up in a decreasing order along the four assessment levels.

What caused DIMA to take such an action to ensure adequate financial capacity of those international students? It seems not sufficient to justify this policy with avoidance of document fraudulence. However, almost all of the financial proofs such as money deposit are very hard to replicate or falsify and these are also very easy to be identified by only giving a phone call to their financial institutions. To prevent illegal migration sounds reasonable, but looking closely at the visa subclasses, it can be noted that English language proficiency is a major barrier for all student visa applicants from non-English speaking countries, especially most Asian countries. Most people wanting to illegally immigrate have not got the ability to meet the minimal requirements for English language, with a requirement of an overall band 6 in the IELTS with no less than 6 for each band: listening, reading, speaking and writing. The last reason to justify this policy could be to prevent international students from doing too much part-time work in case their working activities would have a negative impact on domestic labour markets and also affect their own full-time study if viewed from a noble perspective. However, the working visa prescribes a 20 hours weekly working restriction making it impossible to make money enough to cover the tuition fee. Working for international students is more likely to be engaged in as a life experience. As Australia has recruit fee-paying students for around 20 years, international students should have been clear before they apply for student visa that if they cannot afford their schooling fee, they must experience considerable inconvenience after they commence their courses.

How can discursive strategy be used in the discourse of this DIMA policy? It can be perceived that the policy is based on an assumption that Australian government is quite afraid of people from developing countries to entering Australia and remaining illegally. The assumption is made by such a preconception that some students from these countries provided falsified documents when applying for student visas, so DIMA generalized this small group of people to their whole nations presuming that all the people from these countries have the disposition for falsifying documents and incredibleness. In Teo's point of view (2000) and in discursive strategy, DIMA blames these people for their circumstance on their own faults, then naturally they deserve this strict policy. However, one result of which cannot be neglected is that, new applicants from these countries have to take the responsibility for the bad reputation left by their prior student compatriots, although they have done nothing wrong. One example might give a clearer elaboration, such as in a family, all the four children have been raised by the parents and under the same family environment, if a brother broke a vase and left, no one would agree on the practice that the parents should punish the other three.

Conclusion

This paper has provided a broad overview of discursive strategies that the policy-maker can and does exploit, whether consciously or sub-consciously, to develop a particular ideology. It can be seen how discursive strategies like generalization can be used to create a reality that generates and reinforces the negative stereotyping of ethnic minorities or groups.

"Generalization refers to the extension of the characteristics or activities of a specific and specifiable group of people to a much more general and open-ended set" (Teo, 2000). Most significantly, categorising someone into a particular social schema also tends to colour the perception of the meaning of what that person does. Thus a child taking an eraser from another may be seen as aggressive if he is black but assertive if he is white (Sagar and Schofield, 1980). Similarly, while a European student found providing falsified documents may be perceived as an individual case, a Chinese student may likely be ascribed to a nation's orientation. That is based on the preconception of much more such cases happening among Chinese students, with disregard to a much larger Chinese student base in Australia, the individuality of Chinese students.

Given the analysis above, the conclusion could be reached that the way in which the DIMA policy is stipulated and carried out not only reflects but reinforces the kind of social schemata that international students from developing countries are less honest, even less trustful and need to face more restrictive policies. In a naturalized way, these students are gradually distanced from the 'white' society, which is symptomatic of racism.

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