Poaching international students? A study of an Australian university with metropolitan campuses

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Poaching International Students? A Study of an Australian University with Metropolitan Campuses

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Abstract
International higher education is the third largest export industry in Australia. Student attrition is an area of concern in higher education institutions. Most research undertaken so far has focused on domestic student attrition in Australia and globally. There is limited research on the attrition of international students. This study focuses on an Australian university to examine the causes of international students' attrition after their first year of study. It reveals that since 2018, growing numbers of international students have withdrawn from the subject university at the metropolitan campus to enrol in private colleges attracted by lower tuition fees for similar degree qualifications. This trend of student mobility will affect the retention of international students and universities may need to distinguish their courses and value proposition to compete with private colleges. The paper raises questions about the role of education agents in such student mobility and risks related to academic standards and quality in private colleges. The paper also raises questions about risks to quality and competitiveness in universities that have not sufficiently considered the academic and personal needs of international students.

Keywords: international student attrition, poaching of students, marketisation, private colleges, COVID-19.

Introduction
International students have significant presence in western countries (Choudaha, 2017). In countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States of America and Australia, the sector contributes to more than $20 billion annually (Dodd, 2016). Since the mid-20th century, international student mobility has seen steady increases (Banjong et al. 2016). Several factors account for this trend including capacity constraints in the countries of origin at higher levels of education, higher returns on investment in international study, and narrow specialisations in the host countries (OECD, 2018 p.220). The recent Australian government consultation paper on Australian strategy for international education outlines four key roles of international education. They include 1) enhancing Australia's high-quality education system, 2) economic benefit to individuals, education providers and community, 3) human capital in Australia and overseas, and 4) social and cultural development (Australian Government, 2021).

The USA, Europe, and other English-speaking destinations in general, are the dominant actors in international student mobility, notwithstanding the increasing competition from the rest of the world from countries like China, Singapore, and Malaysia (De Wit et al, 2013). The USA is the leading destination for international students, followed by the UK, China, Canada, and then Australia (STUDEE, 2019; Verbik & Lasanowski, 2007). Taking Australia as an example, the value of the international student market has increased 22 per cent since 2016: in 2018 it was worth $32.2 billion (AUD) a year (Robinson, 2018). Offshore international students studying with Australian institutions are mostly from Singapore, China, Malaysia, Vietnam and India (Department of Education and Training, 2018).

The increasing number of students has been influenced by governments' education-migration reforms, which used neoliberal economic frameworks to encourage the participation of full-fee

paying international students (Pasura, 2018, p.35). In particular, the decreased public funding of universities has forced institutions to source alternative sources of income such as international higher education. Emigration policies such as post study work visa arrangements are also implemented to increase international student growth in Australia (Modood and Salt, 2011). Recently the Australian government has introduced policies to encourage international students to enrol at universities in regional locations (Australian Government, 2019).

While the international education industry is booming globally, there are emerging challenges to sustain growth especially in countries that have historically benefited from growth. There is a challenge to the growth of international education in China, Malaysia and Singapore (Ahmad and Shah, 2018). COVID-19 has forced institutions and governments to reassess international education strategy and future directions. The huge reliance on international student income places many institutions at risk especially when future development and investment are reliant on unpredicted growth (Unconventional Economist, 2019). Many institutions are under significant budgetary pressure to invest in new buildings, campus developments and refurbishments due to uncertainty in government policies and funding of universities (Rhodes, 2019). The predominance of international students in some universities or faculties raises questions about the quality of student experience (Cheng, Adekola, Valyrakis & Shah, 2018).

COVID-19 has had significant impact on the growth and sustainability of international education. The risk related to the over-reliance on international student income was well known; however, COVID-19 has further highlighted the vulnerability for higher education institutions (Blackmore, 2020). According to Universities Australia, the university sector will lose $16 billion by 2023 due to border closure (Universities Australia, 2020). In the UK, the loss is projected to be £19 billion (Institute of Fiscal Studies, 2020); $5 billion in the USA in 2020 (NAFSA, 2020); $200 million in New Zealand in 2020 (Gerritsen, 2020) and $3.4 billion in Canada (2020-2021) (Metcalfe, 2020).

This paper is based on a study undertaken at an Australian university with campuses in metropolitan locations. The study was undertaken as a result of high attrition in two commerce related courses with large numbers of international students. The study found that a significant number of international students withdrew after the first year of study and enrolled in private colleges attracted by lower tuition fees and easier entry and graduation. This preliminary study has raised questions about the role of education agents in attracting students from university to private colleges, tuition fees and discounts and the quality and standard of education offered by such colleges. The paper also raises questions about risks to quality and competitiveness in universities that have not sufficiently considered the academic and personal needs of international students.

Review of literature
Knight (2004) defines internationalisation as the process of integrating an international, intercultural, and global dimension into the purpose, functions (teaching, research, and service), and delivery of higher education (p. 26). A study by Garrett and Balsà (2013) examined local and international student understanding of the term 'international university', concluding that language, culture, people, learning, and exchange and travel are the key elements.

Several studies have examined the factors influencing student choice to study abroad. King and Sondhi (2018), found the attraction of enrolment in world class universities, international career and mobility, adventure, and family encouragement as key choice factors for Indian students to study abroad. Chen's (2008) survey of postgraduate Asian students in Canada found a safe place to study and lower tuition and living cost as key factors. In another study, affordable tuition fees, safety, and English-speaking environment emerged as priorities for Chinese students (James-MacEachern and Yun, 2017). A recent study found financial and cost influencers in the decisions for Chinese students to study abroad (Zhu and Reeves, 2019). Wilkins and Huisman (2011) identified employment opportunities and improving English as

central to the motivation to study abroad. A study of African students enrolled in the United Arab Emirates suggested safety, a multicultural environment and economic and political stability as influential factors (Ahmad and Hussain, 2017).

The economic imperative dependence of universities on the tuition fees from international students requires universities to have a clear understanding of the issues facing students. So far, the focus has been on income generation with less emphasis on understanding the role and value of internationalisation. COVID-19 has generated significant concerns for international students. They include mental health and well-being, financial hardship and lack of support to navigate support system while studying remotely. Issues in relation to flexible tuition fee payment, deferral of study and underloading of study load also emerged as concerns (Young, 2021). These issues require urgent attention to improve the quality and competitiveness of Australian higher education.

Brown and Jones (2013) argue for the need to provide service delivery to international students so that student retention is improved, and that positive word-of-mouth publicity helps to increase recruitment. Studies in the UK have shown that an unfriendly host community with which contact is hard to achieve (Brown 2009) hinders student transition into a new country. Loneliness and racism are cited as two factors in international student dissatisfaction in Australia (Andrew, 2020; Florez, 2020; Marginson et al. 2010; Ward, Bochner, and Furnham 2001). According to Choudaha and Schulmann (2014) many institutions are facing retention issues due to poor academic preparation of students, student transfer to prestigious institutions, and unwelcoming campus environment. Students from Europe report higher rates of satisfaction and willingness to recommend the institution as compared to their peers from Asia (Redden, 2014; Glass et al. 2015).

There is a history of concern about higher education student attrition and the driving forces. A report in Australia titled "Improving retention, completion and success in higher education" includes extensive discussion of student attrition which was explored by Norton and Cherastidtham (2018). According to Norton and Cherastidtham, although nearly a quarter of a million students started a bachelor's degree in 2018 in Australia, more than 50,000 left university without getting a degree, and nearly 40% of students who dropped out said they would not begin their degrees again. Full time study, irrespective of age, can have a negative impact on students leading to dropping out from their degree program (O'Keefe, 2013).

A Norwegian study by Hovdhaugen (2011) found that there are negative implications for these students' self-esteem and efficacy after dropping out. There are constraints to the employment prospects of students who dropped out (Cunningham, 2007).

Many studies have analysed the personal and academic factors causing student attrition in universities. Personal factors include: employment commitments, financial pressures, health issues, stress, and family pressures (Beer and Lawson, 2016; Cuthberson et al. 2004; Norton and Cherastidtham, 2018; O'Keefe, 2009; Long, Ferrier, & Heagney, 2006; Maher and Macallister, 2013; Mestan, 2016; Yang, Baldwin, & Snelson, 2017). For example, Grebennikov and Shah (2012) found poor choice of courses, employment commitment, timetabling, and family pressures as key reasons for withdrawal. The academic factors include poor academic advice, poor teaching, choice of courses, and campus-life (Beer, Lawson, 2016). The study by Willcoxson et al (2011) revealed that shortfalls of commitment to course, expectations of teaching and support for learning, and academic confidence are some of the causes of attrition in the first year of study.

Beer and Lawson's (2016) research found that student attrition is a complex, and non-linear problem in Australian universities and it continues to have a negative impact on institutional reputation and revenue. Studies related to attrition of students are mainly related to domestic students. So far, no study has examined the attrition of international students in Australian universities in undergraduate and postgraduate coursework study. A recent review of literature

on student retention and engagement by Tinto (2019) also showed there had been no research about international student attrition. Several studies (Laufer & Gorup, 2018; Sakurai et al, 2012) have focused on international doctoral student attrition. According to Kennedy (2018), choosing to study overseas can be a daunting experience and, once onshore, students decide to switch their courses or institutions for myriad reasons.

The COVID pandemic has prompted fierce competition between institutions internationally. According to (Patty, 2021), some institutions are providing significant discounts to attract onshore international students. There is some evidence to suggest that students are switching institutions. In the UK, it was estimated that 25% of students were considering switching to another institution (London Economics, 2020). While data from other countries are not available, anecdotal evidence suggests that onshore international students in Australia are offered significant fee discounts and higher academic credit. Some private providers offer agents higher rates of commission to switch students (Bolton, 2018; also, Association of Australian Education Representatives in India [AAERI], 2019). Many international students are under significant financial pressure due to job losses (Nguyen and Balakrishnan, 2020), and they may be swayed by the offer of lower tuition fees rather than the quality and reputation of institutions. There is evidence in the USA of students abandoning their first-choice colleges to attend more affordable colleges (Massa, 2020). This highlights that financial hardship is a key contributor for students to switch institutions (EAB Enrolment Services, 2020).

Methodology
The main aim of the study was to find out the 1) causes of international student attrition after first year of study, 2) the status of withdrawing students, 3) factors that have influenced student choice to transfer to another institution, and 4) strategies the university could implement to retain students.

The study was undertaken with 269 international onshore students who enrolled at the University in 2018 and later withdrew in the year. The sample included 119 undergraduate students and 150 postgraduate students. Out of the 119 undergraduate students, 56 responded (47%) and in postgraduate, 47 students responded (31%).

The study used qualitative research methods where telephone survey was undertaken with all withdrawing students in two courses. A telephone survey method was used for a number of reasons including: 1) withdrawing students who left the University and might have changed the postal address; 2) withdrawing students may not have access to university email; and 3) telephone conversation personalised the interaction. The Planning Unit of the university provided the data on withdrawing students. The undergraduate course had an attrition rate of 45% and the postgraduate course had an attrition rate of 36% with close to 150 students leaving after the first year of study. Both the undergraduate and postgraduate course had high number of international students.

Prior to undertaking the actual telephone survey, the script and survey questions were trialled with twelve enrolled international students. The script and survey questions were revised after the trial. The telephone survey was undertaken with the targeted sample. Responses were collected in either first phone call or follow up calls. Data collected in the telephone survey were entered using a spreadsheet which had the questions and drop-down menu response codes.

Causes of attrition
Out of 269 withdrawing students, 103 responded (a response rate of 38%). The causes of attrition were different in undergraduate and postgraduate coursework study. In the undergraduate degree course, the main cause of attrition included a mix of University and personal factors including: learning difficulties, personal and family issues, employment commitments, and other reasons such as location (students preferred a University closer to their accommodation), choice of degree to align with career goals, suitability of timetable, lack

of university campus atmosphere, and lack of diverse student profile. The learning difficulties outlined by students included poor English language skills. The personal and family issues are related to students having caring responsibilities.

The qualitative data collected from undergraduate students who withdrew provided further insights on the causes of attrition. One student outlined learning difficulties and stated *"teaching and learning methods in Australia are different from my home country. I failed four units. I found it difficult to adjust to University studies".* The comment on teaching and learning methods aligns with the findings of the study undertaken by Heng (2017) who suggested that transcultural or diversity training should be arranged for all staff in the institution. Quintal and Phau (2014) also proposed the need for culturally relevant pedagogy to stimulate opportunities for student participation and learning. Charlesworth (2008) identified a diversity of teaching methods to engage students. Chinese and Indonesian students had a tendency to defer to the teacher and to reproduce what had been taught whereas French students favoured methods that would allow them to participate and debate with other opinions in the classroom (Charlesworth, 2008). Soosay (2008) found short video recordings and use of group discussions effective with both international and domestic students.

Domestic and international students experience other learning barriers which affect their progression. Our study found that one of the causes of attrition among international students was poor English language and writing skills. One student said that *"I had learning difficulties. I found it difficult to do assignments - my written English was not great".* Another student stated that *"My English skills are not good enough (e.g. the listening and speaking skills) which made it difficult to learn'.* Heng (2017) suggested the need to provide writing workshops or programs to improve academic writing skills for international students. Rao (2016) found writing styles vary across cultures adding to the challenge of studying overseas. Holmes (2006) asserted the challenge international students face to navigate their academic learning and writing in a non-native language. According to Chaudron (1998), a second language requires more time for students to gain similar levels of understanding compared to that required by first language students. Zainuddin et al (2019), found that employees who can communicate in intelligible English are considered more employable by employers.

Respondents mentioned a lack of sense of belonging to the campus and feelings of isolation. One student said *"I was studying at xxx campus and I didn't feel as if I was at a University campus. The class did not have diverse students to interact and make friends – I felt isolated".* Another student stated that *"I prefer diversity of students with more interactions with peers".* Students find it hard to feel part of a group dominated by a national majority. Students feel isolated and disconnected from their peers within and outside the classroom which limits the chances of students to socialise with fellow peers. Research by Cheung and Yue (2013) found positive correlation between international students' social capital derived from local connectedness and their resilience. Social disconnection with peers make students feel isolated or lonely (Zhang, 2016).

The main causes of attrition at postgraduate level include course cost and other financial difficulties. The qualitative data found 24 instances where fee discounts and agents had attracted students to transfer to private colleges was mentioned by respondents. A few examples are mentioned below:

"Cost of the University X course is almost double compared to the private college. University tuition fee is very expensive"

"All my friends were going to the private college and I was left alone so I decided to move too"

"Can't afford due to less hours on job- the private college also offered discount if I moved from the University".

"The fee is cheap in private college and I was offered discount which is a savings for me. My agent recommended private college."

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The qualitative data from the survey with undergraduate students indicate that, despite meeting English language admission requirements, students struggled to succeed due to difficulties with English language skills which have adversely affected their ability to complete assessments. The subject university offers academic writing skills which includes tutorial support, time management, and literature review/citation to transition in first semester of study. Despite these services, students were attracted to private colleges. Some students raised concerns about a perceived lack of campus life atmosphere that is experienced at the main campus. Students felt less sense of belonging to the university with lack of campus life atmosphere similar to the main campus. The campus at which the students are studying is mainly for international students. Some students withdrew from the university due to a lack of friends and a social network. A recent study by Bordia et al, (2019) found that prospective international students gather information from their social networks to make informed decisions about choosing a University. Postgraduate students in this study outlined high tuition fees, discounts offered by private colleges and role of education agents and friends in influencing their choices to withdraw from the university.

Status of withdrawing students and financial loss
The study examined the status of students who withdrew from the University. The findings suggest that 90% of the withdrawing students are studying full time at another institution. The findings also suggest that 85% of the students are working part-time while studying. The survey asked students about their new destination or institution of study. Interestingly, all students in both undergraduate and postgraduate level have joined private colleges. The students who withdrew from the undergraduate degree enrolled in 4-6 different private colleges. A few joined private vocational colleges to undertake diplomas rather than continuing undergraduate degree. All respondents who withdrew from the postgraduate degree enrolled in one private college.

Given that the cost of the course was an important factor among postgraduate students, the researchers examined the tuition fees in private colleges and compared those to the university. The findings suggest that private colleges are offering undergraduate degree courses between the range of $36,000 - $57,000 compared to $66,400 in the subject university. Similarly, the postgraduate tuition fees in the private colleges ranged from $27,600 – 36,400 compared to $54,500 in the subject university. The financial loss estimated to the subject university as a result of attrition in both courses was around $10 - $18 million in undergraduate course and $8 million in one postgraduate course between 2017-2018.

Factors influencing choice to study at private colleges
Respondents were asked about the factors that influenced their choice to study at private colleges. The key choice factors included low tuition cost, ease of entry and graduations, and referral from friends. The qualitative data provided further insights on key choice factors. Most students mentioned easy to pass and opportunity to re-submit assessments. The open-ended comments align with the quantitative data about easy entry and graduations and cost of the course in private colleges. For example, students commented:

"Much easier to do the course at the college. Assessments are easier to do. Peers are international and easy to talk"

"I could resubmit assessment and pass. At university was strict with re-submission and remarking".

"Flexible in marking assessment. Attendance is not compulsory here in private colleges. University is strict with marking".

"At XX College it is easy to extend assignment deadlines, resubmission is allowed, and the workload is less than the University".

"By studying at the private college, I am able to save the money which I can use for rent and food"

The qualitative data has provided some insights on key choice factors that led students to enrol with private colleges.

Previous studies have shown that tuition cost is one of the important choice factors for many international students together with institutional quality and country reputations (Wilkins et al. 2013). Studies about quality assurance in private colleges have revealed issues with academic standards and quality. These issues range from quality of teaching and status of degrees (Mok, 2009), limited investment in resources and facilities (Lim, 2010), fraudulent practices (Universities UK, 2010), substantial academic credit given based on life experience (Davis, 2010), and graduates lacking key skills (Middlehurst and Woodfield, 2004), to poor faculty structures to enhance quality (Wang, 2010). A recent study undertaken in Australia on the outcome of accreditation of private colleges suggests a number of issues requiring attention. These issues relate to assessment standards and moderation, academic workforce planning, professional development of academic staff, adequacy of resources and infrastructure, processes for monitoring education outcomes of students and robust corporate and academic governance (Shah et al, 2019).

What can the university do?
Respondents were asked what the university could do to avoid future attrition of international students. Response from students ranged from lowering the tuition fees, additional English language and tutorial support, flexible timetable and improved campus life and engagement activities. Many students spoke about high tuition fees and the need to lower the cost. Students also suggested more investment in scholarships to ease the financing of tuition fees. Most withdrawing international students recognised the quality of teaching at the University, but added that they had been deterred by tuition costs. Some of the recurring comments include - "*Reduce cost and offer more scholarships. Avoid putting restriction of high GPA to maintain the scholarship". "I like the quality of teachers – they were friendly and helpful, but the tuition fees were high". "Cost is important for many students – it needs to be comparable to other institutions. The University is better in terms of teaching- and I can come back if Uni will offer lower cost. Quality is important, but price also comes into consideration".*

Tuition cost was the key factor influencing the withdrawal of international students from sub-continent background at the subject University. Recent data by the Australian International Education (AEI) shows that the key factors influencing the choice to study in Australia include quality of teaching, reputation of the qualification, and personal safety and security (AEI, 2018).

Our study found that some students suggested the need for support in understanding assessment requirements. Some raised concerns about unfair marking of assessment. Some of the recurring statements include – "*Teacher/tutors should guide students how to prepare assignments and submit online. Some students are being disadvantaged when it comes to marking of assessments. Found teachers are hard in marking international student assignment".*

Some international students call for teachers to 'unpack' assessment requirements and expectations. Effective use of tutorials with group interaction would assist students in understanding assessment requirements. Short videos from the unit/module coordinator uploaded on the learning management system about how to complete or unpack the assessment is useful for students. Opportunities for students to discuss or brainstorm assessment questions in groups are helpful before students undertake their individual assessments. The issue of unfair marking of assessment is contentious. Many academic staff raise concerns about the poor attendance of some international students with a negative impact on student learning. A summary of overall feedback on assessment of the cohort on learning management system is also helpful for the students to know where most students have done well, and further opportunities for improvement.

Withdrawing students suggested extra academic support such as additional tutorials. They suggested that the institution needs to identify key barriers faced by students early in the semester and develop tailored programs to assist students. While many institutions provide such support such as academic skills, writing, literature review, time management, and other discipline specific need, such services may not be at the same scale at metropolitan campuses. The University may consider building some of the skills in first year curriculum to support student learning. Some of the common comments related to academic skills include – "*Support for students based on learning barriers. Teachers need to guide students in learning. Additional tutorial class, individual support, English writing skills and building confidence. Provide English support to international students*".

Students suggested the need to improve on timetabling. Many international students are working part-time and require flexible timetable. Students prefer to come to the campus for few days a week to attend the lectures and tutorials rather than all five days. They also prefer classes to start after 11am rather then 8.30 - 9.00am. A few statements include – "*Timetable needs to be flexible given most students are working part-time. Class time should also start late rather than early in the morning*".

Finally, the students suggested the need for student engagement events that creates campus vibe. Universities with metropolitan campuses mostly for international students have struggled to develop innovative learning spaces which engage students. Campus design, learning space and student engagement activities need to be well thought to attract, engage and retain international students. Most international students inform their choice and decision based on marketing material and institutional websites which portrays the campus life and support provided at the main campus rather than the metropolitan campus. Several students stated the following –"*Campus is small - better campus life experience needed so that there is always something to see, do and engage with*".

Discussion and Conclusion
Previous research on student attrition is mainly focused on domestic students. There is limited published research on international student attrition in Australia and globally. Whilst our study focused on one institution, its contribution to the literature is significant to higher education globally. The significance is due to the fact that no research has been undertaken worldwide on international student attrition in undergraduate and taught postgraduate coursework programs. The 2018 data for Australia suggests that the attrition of commencing bachelor level international students in public universities is around 10% with a 32% rate among bachelor students in private colleges (Australian Government Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2018).

Australian universities have policies and processes to enable the achievement of good academic outcomes for students, with a range of academic and support services, although they have challenges to overcome in the effective support of international students. Universities and private colleges are subject to accreditation standards by the national regulator. Attrition due to high tuition fees and the transfer of students to private colleges are threats to the universities. Students with poor academic achievement in the first year of study at the subject university tend to withdraw and look for cheaper education providers where they may complete courses more easily. It is interesting to note that, as early as 1997, concern was raised about the poaching of international students by the education agents from university to another. The media article stated that students had been offered a "bonus" of up to $500 [AUD] if they agreed to change universities and even more if they persuaded others to switch as well (Times Higher Education, 1997). Critics argued that education agents were often more interested in making money than serving students or institutions (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2011). Evidence in Australia suggests that during COVID-19, international students are recruited by agents from one institution to another (Patty, 2021) with high discounts offered to students.

Our study shows that the international students at the subject university mainly withdrew due to high tuition fees and also the influence of peers/friends who moved to private colleges. The movement of more than 100 students from the subject university to a private college was influenced by the education agents. Increased competition and proliferation of private colleges has shifted the focus of higher education to profit with a price tag. According to Gregorutti et al (2016), this assumption has resulted education providers to treat education as a business played by market rules under the assumption that competition will improve quality and overall education performance.

The findings suggest several areas for improvements. First, universities need robust processes to recruit and review education agents. Due diligence needs to be undertaken annually to identify and intervene on any unethical practices. The review should include feedback from students on the expectations and experience with education agents. Second, the study highlights that the academic and personal wellbeing of some students is inhibited by poor English Language skills. While the English language entry requirement is comparable to other institutions, universities need to focus their attention on providing relevant support programs in the first year of study. Peer mentoring, personalised academic skills and writing support, and increased focus on clarifying assessment expectation are needed with commencing students. Universities with metropolitan campuses mainly for international students need to provide adequate resources to support international student learning. A wide range of support services required to ensure comparability with the main campus. Third, universities need to develop cyclical reviews of metropolitan campus operations to assess the extent to which resources are adequate to support international student learning. The use of student feedback may not fully outline the full extent of what is required to enhance the learning experience of students. Finally, national regulators or external quality agencies should closely monitor attrition trends of international students and intervene where there are complaints about unethical practices.

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