

Analysis of Australian Strategy for International Education 2021-2030 through Policy as Texts and Policy as Discourse

Jinjiao Zhou

Moray House School of Education, The University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK
Email: jinjiao_zhou@163.com

How to cite this paper: Zhou, J. J. (2023). Analysis of Australian Strategy for International Education 2021-2030 through Policy as Texts and Policy as Discourse. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 11, 469-478. <https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2023.1110026>

Received: May 16, 2023

Accepted: October 23, 2023

Published: October 26, 2023

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Abstract

Australian international education has consistently shown strong pioneering and innovation. In 2015, Australia formulated its first National Strategy for International Education, the National Strategy for International Education 2025, which aims to position Australia as a global leader in education, training and research. In 2019, international education in Australia provided about 250,000 jobs and generated \$40.3 billion in income, promoting education and economic development. However, the novel coronavirus pandemic has brought numerous challenges to international education worldwide, and Australia, a significant exporter of international education, has suffered a major impact. The number of international students in Australia's international education has plummeted, the scale of the industry has shrunk, the international reputation has been damaged, and other crises, its structural imbalance has also been revealed. As a result, in December 2021, the Australian Government launched a new International Education Strategy, the Australian Strategy for International Education 2021-2030, "Strategy 2021-2030", with the challenge of change as an opportunity to achieve the recovery and long-term growth of its international education. This paper will analyze the positive impact of this education policy on the economic development of Australia. Overall, this paper aims to provide valuable insight into Australia's international education strategy and its effect on its economic and social development. By analyzing policy texts and discourses, this paper will contribute to a deeper understanding of policy objectives, implementation challenges and potential outcomes, providing helpful information for policymakers, researchers and stakeholders in the international education sector.

Keywords

Australian Strategy, International Education, Policy Analysis, Discourse

1. Introduction

The analysis of the Australian Strategy for International Education 2021-2030 reveals a dynamic interplay between policy and strategy, shedding light on how these two elements are intricately linked in shaping the direction and execution of the nation's education initiatives. Policy, often articulated through official documents and regulations, provides the foundational framework for the implementation of strategic objectives (Ball, 1993). Within the context of Australian international education, policy documents delineate specific rules and guidelines governing aspects such as visa regulations, tuition fee structures, academic standards, and international student rights. These policies serve as the tangible tools through which strategic goals are realized. Conversely, strategy serves as the overarching roadmap guiding an organization or government's long-term vision and goals (Klein, 2016). In the Australian international education context, the 2021-2030 strategy outlines ambitious objectives such as increasing international student enrollment and enhancing the quality of education. The strategy sets the broad direction and priorities, dictating where policy focus should align to achieve these goals.

Crucially, the synergy between policy and strategy becomes apparent in the alignment of policies with strategic objectives. For instance, if the strategy emphasizes expanding international student enrollments, corresponding policies might facilitate streamlined visa processes and financial incentives to attract a broader demographic of students (Steiner-Khamsi, 2015). Furthermore, it is essential to recognize the discursive dimension of policy within the strategic landscape. Policy discourse encompasses the broader societal dialogue and stakeholders' perspectives that shape policy formation (Ball, 1993). In the realm of international education, understanding the discourse surrounding policies is crucial. It unveils the underlying ideologies and rationales driving policy decisions. For instance, changes in visa policies may reflect shifts in the discourse around immigration and internationalization.

In conclusion, the Australian Strategy for International Education 2021-2030 epitomizes the interdependence of policy and strategy in driving the nation's educational aspirations. Policies serve as the practical instruments for implementing strategic goals, while the strategy provides the overarching vision. The alignment of policies with strategic objectives and the recognition of policy discourse contribute to the holistic understanding of how these two elements interact and shape the landscape of international education in Australia.

At the beginning of the 21st century, Australia became the third-largest exporter of higher education services. International education has brought considerable export revenue and economic benefits to Australia (Harman, 2005). And

to ensure that Australia can build on the success of its existing education system to seize new opportunities, the Australian Department of Education released the National Strategy for International Education 2025 in April 2016. Subsequently, international education provided Australia with approximately 250,000 jobs in 2019, generating 40.3 billion AUD, which as axiomatic that contributed to the development of Australia's education and economy (Clarke, 2021: p. 2). However, the COVID-19 pandemic, which unfolded in 2020, had a profound and multifaceted impact on Australia's international education export industry. Firstly, one of the most palpable effects of the pandemic was the imposition of rigorous restrictions on international student mobility. Australia, like many other countries, implemented stringent measures such as border closures and mandatory quarantine for incoming travelers. These measures had the immediate consequence of preventing numerous international students from entering Australia as planned. For instance, a significant cohort of Chinese students found themselves unable to commence their studies in Australia during the scheduled academic year due to these travel constraints. This resulted in a cascade of adverse effects, including visa extensions and academic deferments, which not only disrupted the students' educational trajectories but also impacted the revenue streams of Australian universities (Clarke, 2021). Secondly, the international education sector in Australia is heavily reliant on tuition fees paid by international students. However, due to the pandemic, a substantial number of international students either postponed their studies or canceled their enrolments altogether. The Australian Department of Education reported a stark decline in international student enrollments in 2020, leading to significant revenue losses for higher education institutions (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021). This financial strain, in turn, had implications for the universities' ability to maintain the quality of education and support services they provide to international students. Thirdly, the economic impact of the pandemic on Australia's international education export industry was substantial. This sector is a vital contributor to the country's economy, and the pandemic caused a pronounced downturn (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021). Finally, the quality of life for international students in Australia was compromised during the pandemic. International students faced not only health risks associated with the virus but also social isolation due to quarantine and social distancing measures. The resultant challenges to their mental health and well-being could have repercussions on their academic performance and overall learning experience. Moreover, these challenges might influence their decisions about continuing their studies in Australia in the future (Babones, 2019).

In summation, the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 had far-reaching and multifaceted consequences for Australia's international education export industry. It imposed restrictions on student mobility, led to tuition fee losses, caused an economic downturn, and challenged the quality of life for international students. These issues were interrelated and had significant implications for both the in-

ternational education sector and the Australian economy as a whole. A critical examination of these effects underscores the need for resilient strategies in the face of global crises, to ensure the continued vibrancy of Australia's international education sector.

The national economy has also ended 28 years of growth since 1991-2019, the number of international students plummeting and the international education industry shrinking. Therefore, in 2021 Australia enacted the Australian Strategy for International Education 2021-2030 to achieve long-term growth in its international education industry (Clarke, 2021).

In this essay I focus on the part of the policy that promotes economic growth and enhances global competitiveness through the international education industry. My main arguments are this policy assumes that the Australian government actively promotes neoliberalism through promoting privatization process in international education delivery and capitalization in students through internationalization, they are using business-like education products to achieve marketization (free-market economization), to promote the privatization process in the implementation of international education. In other words, supporting a free-market economy that is more compatible with neoliberalism furthers Australia's international competitiveness.

2. Theoretical Framework

In an effort to understand the perspectives and actions of Australian international education, the theoretical heuristic in Ball's (1993) is extremely helpful as a theoretical framework for analysis. Policy analysis is not just about understanding the grammar and text of "a text", but about analyzing complex social issues, so Ball divides policy into policy as text and policy as discourse.

The first is policy as text, not "things", "policies are also process and outcomes" (Ball, 1993: p. 11). Ball argues that the policy itself as a text is not necessarily clear or complete, but the policy has its own dynamics within the state. The implementation of the aims and intentions of policy texts is subject to the intervention of different interest groups in practice, but there is not a "zero-sum game" between constraint and agency, but rather a complementarity between the whole and the parts of the policy. At the time of the "2030 Strategy" policy text was introduced, the education sector was at great financial risk with the loss of 70 per cent of students in some areas of education in Australia (Clarke, 2021: p. 4), Therefore, Australia no longer regarded "solidifying the foundation of all kinds of education" as the core direction of its policy, but instead regarded "promoting diversified development" (Clarke, 2021: p. 6) as the strategic starting point for international education transformation and change, with the four strategic thrusts of "aligning with Australia's skills needs, putting students first, and sustaining growth and global competitiveness" attached to it. I argue that this has relevance to the intervention of the text in the policy.

The second is policy as discourse, discourses are "practices that systematically

derive from the objects of which they speak” (Foucault, 1977: p. 49). The interpretation and analysis of policy is within a discourse framework. In the subsequent sections, I will elucidate the reasons why I believe that the prevailing discourse in current Australian social policies is that of “neoliberalism”, which is a discourse within the framework of a new pluralist ideology.

3. Analysis

3.1. Policy as Text

At the text level, theoretical ideas about *policy as text* of international education policy can illuminate the new circumstances demands that present opportunities and challenges for institutions and marketization.

In the realm of education policy in Australia, the influence of neoliberalism is discernible through a set of overarching principles and policy directions. Neoliberalism, as an ideology, prioritizes market-driven forces, individualism, and minimal state intervention in various sectors, including education (Apple, 2005). One prominent manifestation of neoliberalism in Australian education policy is the marketization of education. This entails fostering competition among educational institutions, with the belief that competition will spur improvements in educational quality and efficiency. This concept is notably reflected in the proliferation of school choice initiatives, privatization efforts, and the establishment of charter schools (Harman, 2005). The user-pay principle is another hallmark of neoliberal education policies. Neoliberalism contends that individuals should bear a more significant portion of the costs associated with education, this is apparent in Australian policies (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021). Neoliberalism has contributed to the internationalization and marketization of higher education in Australia. Policies have been shaped to attract international students as a source of revenue for universities. This has led to an intense focus on marketing strategies and competition among institutions to attract and retain international students, aligning with neoliberal notions of global competition and market expansion (Harvey, 2005).

Australia is affected by the COVID-19 epidemic and hill fire disasters in the 2020 fiscal year, ending 28 years of positive economic growth from 1991-2019; the underemployment rate reaches a record high of 13.8% in 2020, 1.8 million people (about twice the population of Delaware) reduced their working hours or even lost their jobs, a record 7% decline in GDP, with the education and training sector being one of the most affected industries (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021). The recovery of the international education industry is important to Australia’s economic development, as evidenced by the fact that Australia’s international education export earnings ranked fourth among all domestic export industries and first among service industries in 2019 (Clarke, 2021). At the same time, students studying in Australia bring subsidiary economic benefits to other Australian industries. In 2020, the average cost of accommodation for international students in Australia is AUD 89 per night, and the average cost of educa-

tion is AUD 80 per day (Clarke, 2022b).

However, the impact of the COVID-19 epidemic has seen a dramatic reduction in the number of international students in Australia, with many international students unable to enter the country leading Australia having to resort to adopt online teaching or delaying the start of school. Statistics in the Australian government website show that excluding international students with no clear location and those clearly outside Australia of 30,200 and 108,800 respectively, the total number of international students registered in the of the 395,200 students enrolled, this represents a combined total of approximately 35 per cent. This compares to 256,200 students (about half the population of Wyoming) explicitly in the country, or approximately 65 percent (Clarke, 2022a). The decline in the total number of international students in Australia and the number of students in the country has not only taken a significant toll on the international education industry but has also had a serious impact on the Australian national economy. It is therefore easy to analysis the close relationship between the recovery of the Australian economy and the recovery of international education, and the reason for the promotion of international education in policies that create a favorable environment for its development is that the recovery of international education is an essential element of Australia's economic recovery.

Firstly, to achieve sustainable international education, the 2023 policy optimizes the structure of international education structure through two aspects and proposes diversity of students and online education delivery on different prices (Clarke, 2021: p. 6), which respectively point to optimizing the student structure and product structure of international education. International students are the basis for the existence of international education institutions. The Australian government needs capitalization in students through internationalization to drive institutional development and economic recovery. The main source of international students in Australia is currently from Asian countries. It has been established that most of Australia's top universities, represented by The University of Melbourne, have a single country of origin for international students and are at risk of a budgetary crisis for the university due to a lack of international students (Babones, 2019). The product mix, on the other hand, includes the development of courses that meet the needs of industry and the increase and development of offshore and online international education courses. This move is both an adaptation to the post-epidemic era and a contribution to the further expansion of the international education market. At the same time, optimizing the structure of international students goes hand in hand with optimizing the international education product. The more diverse the international student population, the richer the needs and the more diverse the offerings; and the more diverse the student population, the more diverse the group structure. As a result, the Australian international education industry as a whole will flourish, creating a blossoming international education market.

Secondly, Skills needed in Australia (Clarke, 2021: p. 11), the Australian government took measures to guide international students to participate more in

labor-scarce industrial economic activities, such as revising the regulation that international students should not work more than 40 hours in two weeks and relaxing the limitation of working hours of international students (*The Department of Home Affairs, 2022*), which indirectly supports international students' study in Australia and contributes to the country's economic recovery.

Finally, the student-center approach, Enhancing international education mobility and alumni networks (*Clarke, 2021: p. 15*), is an important strategy for improving student experience and satisfaction, as well as for promoting intercultural understanding, as Australia aims to build a connected and caring social community. As a service, the enhancement of a positive student experience and elevated levels of satisfaction is an important guarantee that international education will remain attractive to international students. The circumstances of the "service" created by this policy is what I want to talk about in the second part of policy as discourse, a policy that reflects the commodification of Australian government policy, capitalizing on the neoliberalism of free competition.

3.2. Policy as Discourse

At the discourse level, conceptual ideas about *policy as discourse* of privatization provide more tangible frameworks for promoting neoliberalism.

The first manifestation of discourse is privatization. Privatization of education has Multiple Faces, it can by default or proactively promoted by government (*Verger, 2016: p. 2*). The definition of privatization does not refer to ownership, but a notion of privatization, the neoliberal notion of free competition behind it (*Verger, 2016*). In Australian international education policy, it is like the second type of privatization mentioned by verger. Government privatization in public education, making the public department more business-like, with the Australian government promoting international branch campuses (*Clarke, 2021: p. 24*).

The next manifestation of the policy discourse is market-centrism (marketization), which lead the international education industry be more commodification and commercialization, the government uses Business Strategies in Education, and the stated goal of Business is economic growth (*Steiner-Khamsi, 2018: p. 388*), the Australian government applied the 2nd, 3rd and 4th of these strategies, selling the same products and services to an increasing number of customers, seeking long-term sustainability, setting fee structures for different education products, it reflecting neoliberalist value—more marketing, less government, promoting free markets and privatization through global competition, under the vision of cosmopolitanism, in order to achieve economic growth and improve Australia's global competitiveness. However, unlike the 2025 strategy, the 2021-2030 strategy has a stronger connotation of student-centered, humanistic international education, and this is the third part of the strategy I would like to mention, the effects of education in practice under policy as discourse.

3.3. Policy Effects

Early research in Australia found that if the market overemphasizes the eco-

conomic value of international students, it can undermine the academic and educational significance of internationalizing education (Kumar, 2005). In the 2030 strategy, the four themes are all student-centered. While promoting the privatization process, these measures include strengthening the position and driving force of humanism in the change of education policy, ensuring that the education system can better make learning goals and results more closely consistent with the expected professional ability and industry standards, and then enhance the resilience and competitiveness of international education from the connotation, and promote the fairness and sustainability of education.

Online and offshore education is an important breakthrough in the resurgence and development of Australian international education, also an important way to realize the diversification of international education structure. Schools implementing “international standards” are on the rise globally, with a country’s high economic status even making degrees more valuable (Steiner-Khamsi, 2015). However, compared to traditional inbound education, online and offshore education lacks a native Australian learning environment, many of the functions of international education are not realized, which directly affects the quality of teaching and thus affects the recognition of academic qualifications, which is not conducive to long-term sustainability. At the policy effect, we need to see that Gap between texts and reality, privatization also provides social injustice in accessibility rather than humanitarianism in neoliberalism. Australia intends to nurture its unique strengths in international education through industry (commercialization) led and student-centered strategies, and to develop a distinctive brand of “Study in Australia”, but the realization of its vision remains to be seen.

Policymakers must place paramount importance on elevating educational quality to attract and retain international students. The strategy should endorse a diverse array of academic programs and ensure the provision of high-caliber teaching. Such an approach will not only attract a broader spectrum of international students but will also augment Australia’s standing as a global educational destination. Policymakers can foster market expansion by promoting educational collaborations, offering enticing scholarships, and exploring novel international market opportunities. These initiatives will diversify Australia’s international student cohort and reduce reliance on specific source countries. A holistic international student experience is not only instrumental in enhancing student satisfaction but also in fortifying Australia’s international repute. Policy decisions should factor in the long-term sustainability of international education. Emphasizing policy sustainability will help sustain Australia’s appeal as an environmentally conscious study destination.

Finally, while the challenges posed by the global pandemic have temporarily subsided, policy-making should exhibit increased flexibility and adaptability. Measures may encompass promoting online learning options, flexible study arrangements, and providing robust health and welfare support for international students. Such measures will ensure international students receive ample support during crises while upholding Australia’s reputation as a safe destination.

In summary, these recommendations align with the “Australian Strategy for International Education 2021-2030” and aim to support Australia’s international education policy. Their objective is to elevate educational quality, enhance the international student experience, diversify international markets, promote sustainability, and address contemporary challenges in the global education landscape.

4. Conclusion

In this article, I analyzed Australian Strategy for International Education 2021-2030. My main argument is this policy assumes that Australian government actively promotes neo-liberalism. Moreover, I focus on this policy using policy as text and policy as discourse as a theoretical framework to understand the motivations and behaviors of the Australian government, specifically, it Reflects neoliberal values. Finally, I believe that international education strategies should build policies and ethical systems around the right to human learning, and the synergistic development of education guarantee systems, a combination of privatization and humanism to achieve effective values for international education to reap long-term benefits, which is a good embodiment of neoliberalism.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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