



International Student University Support Services: Specialised Verses Mainstreamed

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Abstract

The multi-billion dollar international education market has seen Australian tertiary institutions become heavily reliant on international student fees. This scenario is becoming increasingly relevant to the UK, US, Canada and other nations vying for a share of this lucrative market. As of July 2011 there were 487,704 full-fee paying international student enrolments in Australia, representing a decline of almost 10 per cent during the year-to-date (AEI, 2011). International student commencements declined by eight per cent during this period. Notwithstanding increased visa restrictions and poor monetary exchange rates, this setback has been largely attributed to reputation damage caused by issues relating to student safety and support. These circumstances have fuelled interest in the debate concerning how best to provide support services to international students. Ritzer's McDonaldization thesis helps to explain the dynamics associated with the rationalisation or 'mainstreaming' of international student support services within the context of the commodification of higher education. This study presents the case of an Australian university that moved from specialised international student support to a mainstreamed model. The paper draws on 48 in-depth interviews with university staff members including 31 females and 17 males between 30 and 60 years of age and of various ethnic backgrounds. The study suggests that international students are more secure when specialized services are available and that the level of support they require is not adequately provided under a mainstreamed model. It is argued that the 'one-size fits all' approach associated with mainstreaming the provision of international student support services is not in the best interests of international students and questionable whether or not it is in the long-term best interests of the University.