

**THE INTERNATIONAL STUDENT SAFETY DEBATE:  
MOVING BEYOND DENIAL**

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## THE INTERNATIONAL STUDENT SAFETY DEBATE: MOVING BEYOND DENIAL

A reputation for being able to provide international students with a safe study environment is a valuable competitive asset in the international education market. Despite this being the case, until very recently international student safety has not been underpinned by a comprehensive literature that explores and debates how the safety of these students is best assured. Similarly, within the education industry the safety issue has attracted little debate and indeed has been avoided for fear that discussion might induce concern amongst customers and undermine the growth in student numbers. This situation is now in a process of transition. Leaders of the education export sector in an increasing number of nations are beginning to accept that they need to bring safety and the analysis of safety provision to the centre of international education theory, marketing and practice. Focusing on safety from criminal activity, in this paper we contribute to this emergent debate by detailing why student safety has become a topic that is beginning to be highlighted rather than avoided. We focus on the situation in five countries, embracing a multi-country focus because international student safety debates tend to reflect country specific social and political environments. We begin with a discussion of the situation in Russia and the US and then proceed to examine the evolving student safety debate in New Zealand, the United Kingdom and Australia. Where Russia and the US have traditionally viewed international education as a means of building global influence and national research capacity the last three states have embraced international education primarily as a revenue generating exercise. The paper explains why in Russia, the US, NZ, and the UK international student safety began to be prioritised in promotional literature and on the ground from 2005 and why Australian officials only appear to have begun to take the safety issue seriously in late 2008. In explaining the behaviour of the for-profit players, the paper highlights the important role played both by commentators who insist it is unacceptable that profit be prioritised over student safety and the capacity of international students' home governments to influence the policies of host governments and institutions.

### Russia

The international student safety debate in Russia focuses primarily on hate crime by which is meant "the violence of intolerance and bigotry, intended to hurt and intimidate someone because of their race, ethnicity, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, or disability" (Department of Justice 2001). In Russia, international students have been primary victims of this form of crime this being a development engendered by the 1990s loss of national pride, decline in living standards, separatist bombings, and a free speech movement that cedes racist individuals and groups the right to voice their hate.

The extent of the hate crime problem was long suppressed by the Russian government which held these crimes to be a national embarrassment and hence a topic to be avoided in public debate. This position began to be abandoned, however, as Russia re-emerged from the devastation imposed on the nation by the 'shock theorists' of the 1990s. Thus in 2005, the magnitude of the issue was highlighted by the Sova Information-Analytical Centre which reported that in the previous year there had been 179 attacks on international students across Russia resulting in 28 deaths and 366 injuries (see also Smolentseva 2004 and Leviyeva 2005). Adding substance to these bare statistics, MacWilliams (2006) told the story of Simo, a Moroccan ophthalmology student who lived for six years in Voronezh a university town 400 kilometres from Moscow:

"For years we could never go down there; it was like walking into a trap," Simo says of a series of underground walkways at a major intersection. "That's where Amaru was killed," he says, lifting his chin toward a deep, dark archway across Peace Street. "Here a student from China was attacked in broad daylight while people

stood around and watched, even the cops," he says as he cuts through Eaglet Children's Park.

Simo, who headed the Foreign Students Association, had been attacked three times but nonetheless remained convinced that: "Whoever says going to college here is difficult is lying." His comment says much about the value of assessing safety on the basis of self perceptions rather than material reality. This is the more so given Simo acknowledged Russian police often failed to take attacks on international students seriously and the advice he offered on how to remain safe:

[International students] who fare OK are the ones who smoke, who drink, the ones who involve themselves in the community," he says. "The ones who suffer are the weak ones who are afraid, who don't stand up for themselves. They need to be tough because here, in Russia, it's the survival of the fittest: They eat the weak.

Through the first years of the current decade such stories made it increasingly difficult for Russian universities to recruit international students and in this environment the safety issue began to be debated with more openness and candour. In 2005, for example, the press reported that international students had written to the St. Petersburg governor, Valentina Matvienko, urging her to take increased measures to provide for their safety and informing her of an attack on three medical students in which none of the perpetrators had been detained even though police found a passport possibly belonging to one of them at the scene. Responding to these expressions of concern Education and Science Minister, Andrei Fursenko, declared that his ministry would reconsider the list of universities it recommends to international students, boost security on all campuses, and advise universities to establish councils that would be charged with assessing the security situation and providing advice to students on how to secure their safety. Similarly, in 2006 the speaker of the Upper House of Parliament of the Russian Federation, Sergei Mironov, pledged his determination that the safety of international students must not be infringed. Mironov issued this declaration at a meeting held with representatives of the Association of Foreign Students in the Russian Federation in Moscow. At this first ever meeting of the parliament and foreign student representatives Mironov observed that the federal government rejected the ideas of those who insisted Russia is only for Russians and "expressed great sadness at the recent racial attacks on foreign nationals in cities like St. Petersburg, his hometown, Moscow, Voronezh and a few more other cities of the country and made it clear that those involved in such anti-racial and religious activities should be brought to light and punished according to the laws of the country and should not be given the chance to destroy the Russian state." (Anonymous 2008) Echoing this perspective Minister Fursenko who participated in the 2006 meeting, stated that "the Russian Federation welcomes and will continue to stimulate the inflow of foreign students into the country [because the] Russian Federation itself has great potential, strategic and economic interests in training foreign students particularly when Russia still has one of the highest standard of education and also remains one of the cheapest in the world".

The willingness of high level Russian officials to acknowledge that they have a systemic problem with international student safety is an important development and an action commonly avoided by their counterparts in other nations even when justified. Much remains to be done to confront this problem as is indicated by the fact that on the 20<sup>th</sup> April 2007 Russian television reported international students at the Moscow Sechenov Medical Academy had been instructed to stay indoors because racist gangs were attacking "blacks" as part of their commemoration of Hitler's birthday (Finn 2007; Harding 2007). Nevertheless, acknowledging there is a problem is a major advance on the strategy of denial that prevailed prior to 2005. It is an important development also for it constitutes an implicit recognition at the highest level that international students have a right to be informed if their safety is at risk and a right to know where this threat is greatest. Further, the acknowledgement is important

because it highlights the fact that those in a position of authority can be induced to act appropriately if they can be brought to accept that denial that there is problem can undermine the capacity of education institutions to recruit the foreign students that are needed to build and sustain a globally competitive research agenda and economy (Leviyeve 2005; Todd 2007; De Witt 2008).

## **The United States**

Within the US, the need to remain competitive in the global competition for research talent has also shaped discussion of international student safety. The US debate has been framed by what Skinner (2007,1) terms the “foreign student regulatory dilemma”. This phrase refers to difficulties generated by the fact that a great many Americans wish to exclude international students from the US because they believe these foreigners are a threat to the wellbeing of US citizens. Educators, business and key arms of the state, however, want to sustain the inflow because as with their Russian counterparts these actors recognise that international students make a major contribution to the nation’s research effort.

Fear that international students present a danger to American citizens is widespread in the US despite the fact that research suggests an increase in the proportion of foreign students on campus tends to be associated with reduced crime (Volkwein, Szelest and Lizotte 1995; Larsen 2008). The fear was manifest prior to the 11<sup>th</sup> September bombing but was dramatically boosted by the fact that four of the highjackers entered the US on student visas (Skinner 2007). Much has been made of the latter point by opponents of the international student program. Borjas (2002), for example, has observed:

Hani Hasan Hanjour, got a visa to study English at ELS Language Centers .... He did not attend a single class. Instead, he became one of the terrorists in the plane that crashed into the Pentagon on September 11. And two other terrorists were waiting for the official approval of their student visas to attend flight school — an approval that the Immigration and Naturalization Service dutifully mailed out six months after the attacks.

This message was echoed by Malkin (2004) who encouraged fear of international students by identifying these students as a danger in her provocatively titled *Invasion: How America Still Welcomes Terrorists, Criminals, and Other Foreign Menaces to Our Shores*.

Recognising it was confronting a systemic problem, the Association of University Educators (NAFSA) responded by trumpeting the importance of international students to the US economy and national security (Bernstein 2003: Johnson 2004: Hughes, White and Hertz 2008; Urias and Yeakey 2008). It also launched and sustained a lobbying effort designed to convince legislators and the public that while international students may in very rare cases threaten the safety of Americans this danger can be provided for by a much lower level of vigilance than was introduced following S11 (Johnson 2004, 25, 29; see also NAFSA 2006, 2008). With the US share of the international education market rapidly declining, NAFSA and US scholars also stepped up efforts to convince prospective students that they had nothing to fear from their US hosts.

As part of this latter effort researchers have highlighted the fact that students who reside in the United States become less fearful they will be victimised the longer they stay in the US. Research and promotion of this development predates S11. As early as 1984, Sundeen examined how fear of street crime is influenced by international students’ daily experience in the US. Sundeen was surprised to find that interacting with students from one’s home country increases fear of crime. Specifically, it was found the “amount of participation in cultural groups and activities is associated positively with feelings of fear, i.e., the greater the participation, the greater the feeling of being very unsafe” (Sundeen 1994, p?). From this

finding Sundeen deduced that while participation in social events strengthens social ties amongst international students, such activities commonly involve leaving the safety of the home and this increases fear one may be victimised. Moreover, social events create environments where crime information is exchanged and learning others have been victimised tends to increase fear for one's own safety. This latter observation was subsequently supported by Coston (2004, 189) who found students "who had heard about the victimization experiences of other foreign students ... tended to be more worried about becoming the victim of a crime".

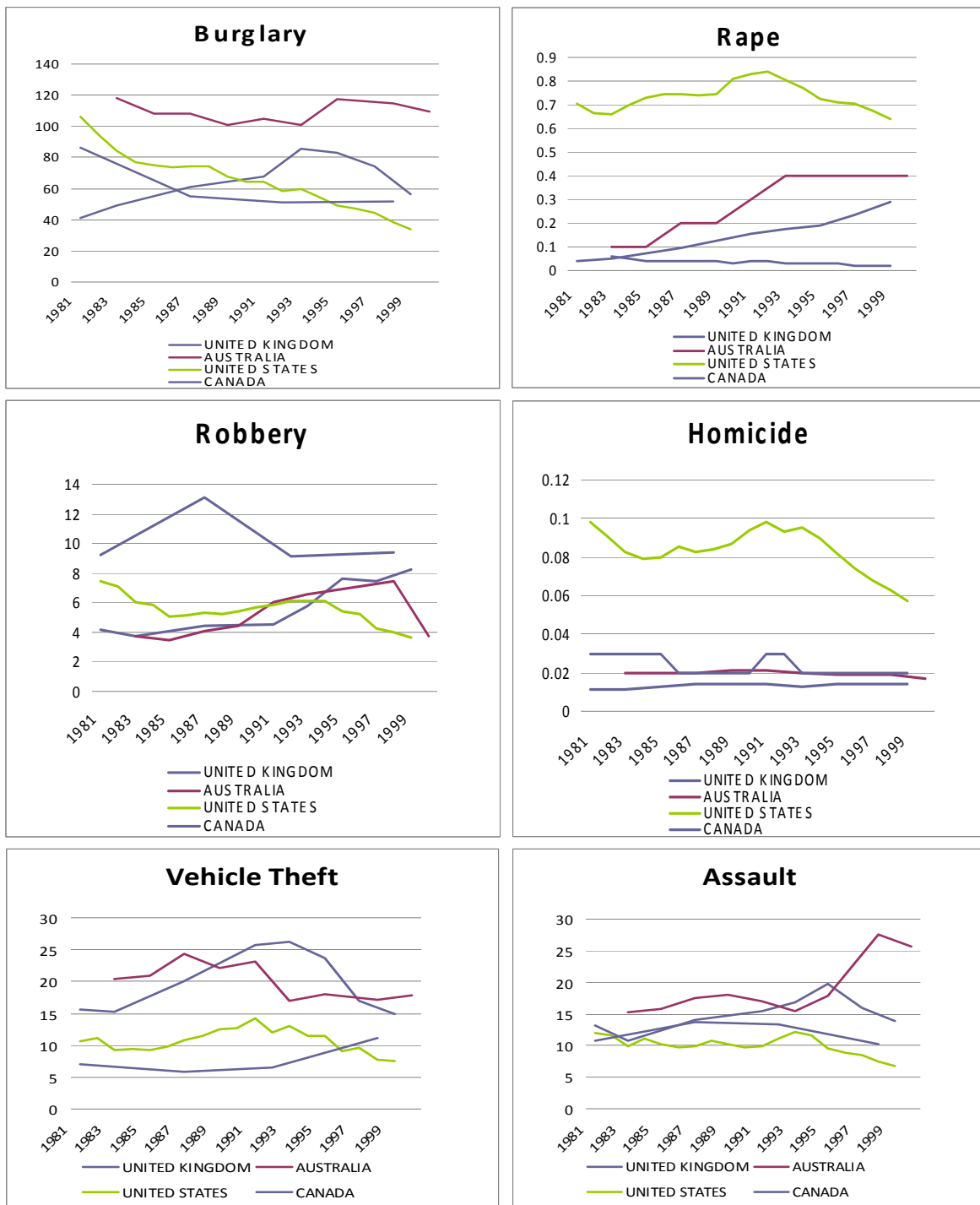
Coston confirmed Sundeen's claim that the longer international students are resident in the United States the less they fear becoming a crime victim. He also determined that many foreign students believe crime in the US is no greater than in their home countries, the proportion of international students who become crime victims while in the US is no greater than is the norm in their home countries, the nature of the crimes that beset these students is similar (primarily involving burglaries and theft), and most foreign students find means to isolate themselves from the danger of becoming a crime victim.

Despite having access to this positive research, US institutions have found that selling the message the United States is a safe study destination is a serious challenge. Indeed, in 2008 i-Graduate reported that prospective international students viewed the USA as being no safer than China (Archer 2008). This is not surprising given the depiction of the US crime situation promoted by Hollywood, the many hate crimes suffered by international students in the period following 9/11, and the widespread distain for the US generated by the Bush administration (Harvard Civil Rights Project 2003; Leiyeva 2005; Madsen 2006; Pinkerton 2006, Todd 2007; Urias and Yeakey 2008). It is a challenge also made difficult by the restrictive visa conditions imposed after 9/11 and the decision of the Department of Homeland Security to subject international students to "incident reporting technology" that renders them vulnerable to anonymous denunciation as criminals (Altbach 2004; Kichigina 2008). NAFSA has lobbied tirelessly to combat this situation and achieved some success but as late as August 2008 it was advising that a further easing of restrictions imposed on international students was required.

Despite improvements, the visa process is still unnecessarily onerous. Name checks, especially for students with Arabic names, can hold up visa applications indefinitely because of similarities to names on various watch lists. Students complain of disrespectful treatment at ports of entry. Once in the country, they become subject to a monitoring system—financed with a fee, now being raised to \$200, paid by the students—that was thrown up hastily after 9/11 and is easy to run afoul of, which can result in hassle, expense, and even deportation. During their sojourn in the United States, international students are often reluctant to travel internationally for academic conferences, vacations, or family visits, weddings, or funerals, because of uncertainty over being able to return. Efforts to make social security numbers and driver's licenses more secure have placed legitimate international students in a legal limbo where it is difficult-to-impossible for some to obtain these essential identifiers.

Given these circumstances, convincing international students that the US is a safe study destination is a difficult but it is possible and is likely to become easier in the near future. It is possible for as revealed in Figure 1, those charged with marketing US education can rightly argue that the incidence of crime has declined dramatically over the last three decades and the forms of crime that tend to beset international students are more prevalent in a number of competitor nations (Segal 1994; Madsen 2006; Kichigina 2008).

**Figure 1. Incidence of Crime in Australia, Canada, United Kingdom and the United States**



Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics (2004)

Successful promotion of the view that international students will be safe if they study in the US has also been made easier by the fact that the campaign to convince the US government that it needs to ease migration laws that threaten the safety of international students has achieved measurable successes. Hence, in 2008 the Bush administration embraced reforms that included a softening of the monitoring regime and an extension of the time students can stay and work in the USA after graduation. These developments are likely to be further advanced by the new Obama administration for during the presidential election

campaign Obama's representatives promised to prioritise the need to reduce the risk international students will run afoul of US visa stipulations.

That there is likely to be an 'Obama effect' that will increase the competitiveness of the United States in the global market for international students has caused consternation within those nations that benefited from the threats to international student safety imposed in the post-S11 period. In the UK this possibility led the *Guardian* newspaper to warn:

Dominic Scott, chief executive of the UK Council for International Student Affairs, said there will inevitably be a shift in perception as a result of Obama's victory that will work to the advantage of the US. "The UK has increased its recruitment quite successfully over the last four or five years, because of increased security measures that made the US less attractive and far less welcoming ... The Obama success puts us into a whole new chapter and 4/11 could well be as powerful and influential as 9/11." (i-Graduate 2008)

The *Guardian* proceeded to argue that the US would "without doubt" become more attractive as a destination, and UK institutions would have to raise their standard of service to hold on to current market share and avoid being "swept aside by the sleeping giant". This was a perspective endorsed by Will Archer, director of i-Graduate, who reports that prospective international students tend to be influenced by safety issues more than those students who are actually studying overseas. Having surveyed 2400 individuals with experience of the international education market from over 100 countries i-Graduate reported:

... the recent election of Barack Obama as the President of the USA has had a positive impact on the perception of the USA as a study destination and ... this is likely to result in an increased demand for US higher education from international students (i-Graduate 2008, 12).

The United States' capacity to dilute its immigration requirements, restore its lost esteem amongst the youth of the world, and aggressively mark its institutions should it choose to do so is a formidable threat to other participants in the international education market. It is a threat made greater by the fact that American marketers could respond if they wish to the many jibes their competitors make about student safety in the US by highlighting the fact that the frequency of a number of the crimes international students fear are more prevalent in countries such as Australia and Britain than they are in the USA. This latter possibility is an option US marketers can embrace because, as Coston (2004) has observed, US scholars have armed their public officials with knowledge regarding international student safety that is of significant competitive value in the global education market. This is an advantage that prior to 2005 was not available to any other major English language education exporter and was a situation that began to change only when New Zealand (NZ) was made to pay a heavy price for neglecting the safety of its international student community.

## **New Zealand**

The reason international student safety remained unexplored in New Zealand and indeed in other nations where international education was initially perceived primarily as a generator of export income is not self-evident. However, it appears best explained by the fact that within these states a great many of the actors charged with selling education services were convinced that discussing student safety raised the possibility their nation or institution might be regarded as unsafe. Given this concern, safety became a word whose name was not spoken in polite international education circles. In short, avoidance of debate was a tactic utilised to manage the protection of reputation capital (Joyce and Thomson 1999; Gunningham, Kagan and Thornton 2004; Rivera 2008). This was an approach that was seriously deficient in corporate social responsibility terms because education suppliers and

regulators have a moral duty to analyse and debate student safety in order to ensure they are providing adequately for the wellbeing of their customers. Nevertheless, though avoidance was immoral it was a tactic embraced by the international education sector in all nations that participated in the industry primarily for profit and this remained the case until these profits seekers were shocked into embracing a more morally sound practice.

New Zealand's international education exporters and regulators were the first to experience a change-inducing shock of a magnitude sufficient to convince them to reconsider the wisdom of refusing to debate and analyse international student safety. This jolt was exogenous and befell the industry in 2003 when Chinese embassy officials advised the government in Wellington that its officials were dissatisfied with the level and quality of care being accorded the safety of Chinese students studying in NZ (Li 2007). China's concerns centred on the paucity of resources provided for student safety, the licence allowed fraudulent suppliers, the racial vilification suffered by many Asians, and the disquieting number of Chinese students who became victims and/or perpetrators of crime. Unappreciative of the significance of the warning issued by the Chinese embassy, NZ's government responded by trumpeting the nation's ineffective *Code of Practice for the Pastoral Care of International Students* and by continually insisting New Zealand was a safe study venue. This reliance on 'spin', however, was shown to be a disaster when China's Ministry of Education responded in turn by branding New Zealand as a nation that did not provide adequately for the safety of Chinese students. The message was driven home by the following posting on the Ministry's website:

In recent years, the number of Chinese full fee-paying students studying in New Zealand is increasing rapidly. The number reached over 30,000 by the end of 2002. New Zealand's limited number of tertiary institutions, its inadequate transport and infrastructure do not have capacity to accommodate such a large number of international students. Most Chinese students are very young and study low-level subjects and courses. They do not have a sense of self-control and self-protection. Therefore, there are many problems with these Chinese students, such as tension with homestay families, traffic offences, violence, prostitution, gambling, crimes, fraudulence, drugs, kidnapping, and murdering (Chinese Ministry of Education cited by Li 2007).

China's denunciation had a devastating impact on the NZ education export sector. It also provided important lessons that were not lost on the NZ government nor on the education export sector of other nations. Most importantly, it highlighted with great clarity that host states and education institutions are vulnerable to pressure from nations that are major providers of international students. Within New Zealand the shock inflicted by China's intervention induced a flowering of studies that aimed to identify the nature of the risks besetting international students, how best to preserve student safety, and how to restore NZ's reputation as a nation that provides adequately for the safety of international students (Ward and Masgoret 2004; Butcher and McGrath 2004; Jackson 2005; Nicolas 2005; Collins 2006; Waters 2006; Xi 2006; Li 2007, 2008; Ho, Li, Cooper and Holmes 2007; Tan and Simpson 2008; Yang 2008). The literature thus generated is multifaceted and is unique in that it includes works that discuss the fact that international students can be perpetrators as well as victims of crime. Li (2007, 2008) has made a particularly important contribution to the development of this literature by publishing works that show a small but significant minority of Chinese students have embraced the opportunity provided by being far from home to engage in extortion, fraud, and illegal forms of drug dealing, gambling and prostitution.

New Zealanders reacted to the Chinese intervention by according international student safety a much increased priority. Importantly, as in Russia and the US, the effort was taken in hand by senior government officials. In the case of NZ this meant Deputy Prime Minister

Cullen who used his position to overcome resistance forthcoming from education institutions that resented having to increase the expenditures they allotted to student safety and that had previously been encouraged to treat international students as “cash cows” (Lewis 2005, 5). Armed with the authority of his position and a hostility to neo-liberal economic policy, Cullen forged a program of reform that was designed to both regain New Zealand’s reputation as a safe study destination and to ensure the sustainability and not merely the growth of the international education sector. Steps taken to achieve these goals included a strengthening of the Code of Practice for Pastoral Care and the imposition on education exporters of a reputation management regime designed to increase international student safety that involved a great deal more than spin.

In expanding the safety aspect of NZ’s international education agenda, officials from the Ministry of Education International Unit worked with New Zealand members of ISANA - the “representative body for professionals in Australia and New Zealand who work in international student services, advocacy, teaching and policy development in international education”. Together these agents created a National Safety Advisory Group with representation from the police, immigration, vice chancellors, insurance firms etc. This grouping was charged by Cullen with examining the “effectiveness of information for international students [and] potential safety initiatives for international students” (Cullen 2006) and generated a flow of advice to the government and positive outcomes that helped foster collaboration around safety issues (McGrath 2008 personal communication). This included a concise and well presented document that provides basic safety information for students and alerts them to dangers to their safety prior to their arrival (Safety Network 2008).

That it took both the China shock and a determined senior minister to surmount the neo-liberal ethos that had prevailed in the New Zealand international education sector indicates the strength of the resistance education exporters can manifest when encouraged to increase the resources they apportion international student safety. Cullen was able to overcome much of this resistance precisely because the Chinese had acted and their intervention enabled him to become proactive in working to rebuild NZ’s reputation. As a consequence, international student safety was changed from being a subject deemed unmentionable in NZ higher education circles to a topic recognised as requiring investigation, debate and promotion even if discomfort continued to be manifest amongst those charged with marketing international student places. Both the new openness and the continued existence of caution on the part of the industry was exemplified in a December 2008 speech to the annual ISANA conference by Joris de Bres, the NZ Race Relations Commissioner. The Commissioner dedicated his address to a Korean student Jae Hyeon Kim who had come to NZ to improve his English and was murdered by neo-nazis. In offering his condolences to the family the Commissioner observed that ISANA members have a “particular responsibility to ensure the safety of your students, to make them aware of the risks and to provide them with easily accessible processes to report instances of racial harassment”. He also advised that the Commission was eager to gather from practitioners what they believed constituted good safety practice. However, in making his plea for assistance the Commissioner observed that there was still a long way to go for the Commission’s own research on how tertiary institutions are dealing with issues of international student safety indicated the following:

- There is some reluctance by tertiary institutions to recognise that there is a problem in their own area, although it may be a problem elsewhere
- There are few specific processes for international students experiencing racial harassment off campus, and little specific information on student safety for international students

- The most common processes are generic ones for all students relating to harassment and bullying within the institution
- Little information is available on the incidence of racial harassment of international students on or off campus, and little research is conducted within educational institutions on the subject
- There is a reluctance to share information on complaints about racial harassment

Education institutions, the Commissioner advised, must find ways to move beyond their fear that their reputation will be damaged if they acknowledge there may be a safety problem on their campus, more attention needed to be accorded the safety of international students off campus working in conjunction with organisations such as the police, ethnic councils and local government, and at “the very least, research should be done to establish the degree to which your students experience racial harassment on or off campus, information should be provided to them in plain language about the risk of such harassment, and specific processes for international students should be developed to report any incidences.” (Bres 2008)

### **The United Kingdom**

As with New Zealand, the British international education industry avoided discussion of international student safety prior to the Chinese intervention. However, after 2005 the sector was compelled to abandon this tactic when the Prime Minister launched his Second Initiative on International Education (PMI2). The first initiative dated from 1999 and had primarily been a capacity building and marketing exercise. However, with PMI2 Tony Blair insisted it was not enough to simply grow the business it was also necessary to ensure the sector was sustainable. What prompted Blair to take this new path remains an issue of contention but given the China market had been the driver of PMI1 it is reasonable to assume the Chinese intervention in NZ would not have been lost on the British Government. Irrespective, what is clear is that with PMI2 Britain embraced an approach to international student safety that was intended to shelter its education exporters from the type of shock the NZ experience had shown could occur. Accordingly, PMI2 involves a five-year proactive strategy that aims to both build and sustain the UK’s position as a leader in international education by developing four interconnected strands: “UK positioning; ensuring the quality of the student experience; strategic partnerships and alliances; and diversification and consolidation of markets”. To bolster the industry against the type of shock China inflicted on New Zealand, a multifaceted approach has been embraced that aims to convey the message that the UK is able to provide both a sound education and a rewarding housing, pastoral care, leisure and safety experience (Merrick 2007; Humfrey 2008; CUBO 2008). The issue of safety was accorded particular attention in PMI2 because a number of information sources had reported that safety is the most important of the hygiene factors that influence international students when they are deciding where to study and the UK has a reputation for being “one of the safest places in the world to study” (I-Graduate 2008, 4). This reassuring news has been bolstered by a study of international students already in Britain that found safety to be “the most important element of the lived experience in the UK” (CUBO 2008, 7).

Informed by this knowledge and converted to the notion that a positive reputation is an asset that needs to be valued, maintained and protected; the UK Government from 2005 became proactive in both strengthening and publicising Britain’s capacity to provide a safe study environment. An early public manifestation of this proactive effort was a government funded conference organised jointly by the Office for London and the National Union of Students. Held in March 2006, the conference organisers were asked “to consider ways in which partners with an interest in international students in London could work together to improve

their safety and freedom from property crime". But while this initial effort was important, the British Council (BC) has had primary carriage of the message that the UK is a safe international study destination and that British educators and regulators are making a comprehensive effort to ensure students remain safe. The BC initially went public with the new reputation management strategy in 2006 when it published *Safety First, A Personal Safety Guide for International students*. Freely available on the web, this text aims to convince prospective international students that if they come to the UK they will be able to study in a safe environment.

Topics discussed in *Safety First* include how to approach the police, property insurance, protection of belongings and identify, dangers associated with finding accommodation, racial discrimination and harassment, and physical safety when at home, on the streets, or in public transport or taxis. Throughout the document it is apparent the British Council is very much aware that international students tend to equate safety with the risk of becoming victims of crime. This focus is manifest even when accommodation is being discussed. Thus readers are advised:

If possible, take someone with you when viewing accommodation. If you are alone, leave the address you are going to and your expected time of return with a friend or colleague. Find out exactly who might have access to the accommodation apart from yourself. Be businesslike in your dealings with prospective landlords or landladies. If you feel uncomfortable with anyone who is showing you accommodation, mention that friends know where you are and are expecting your return at a certain time.

The market focus was also manifest in 2007 when the British Council followed up its initial effort by producing a document tellingly titled *Creating Confidence*, which details the results of a research program BC funded to clarify key aspects of international student safety. The report documents students' views on the value of safety lectures and publications, housing and district safety, the proportion of international students who have become crime victims while in the UK, and steps that students might take to ensure they remain safe from crime.

That *Creating Confidence* is a marketing text is indicated not least by the way disappointing survey results are reported. Hate crime is discussed, for example, in a manner intended to dampen the fear that racism may be a threat to personal safety in Britain:

Some 13 per cent of reported incidents involved personal abuse, ranging from racial comments to having liquids and items thrown but falling short of actual bodily harm. Although disappointing, the total number of reports amount to just 221 out of 1,557 respondents so the incidences are, statistically, very few. Concerns about racial abuse in the UK, which exist in many parts of the world, appear to be largely unfounded.

While the British Council safety campaign may be a marketing effort, it has a material substance and has generated important insights regarding the nature of international student safety in the UK. The campaign is also of value because it has been underpinned by actions undertaken jointly with other British institutions and by the holding of gatherings that bring together practitioners and theorists to discuss experiences and develop policy. In October 2008, for example, the BC contributed to a conference titled *Ensuring Student Safety and Security* that aimed to raise safety awareness on campuses and disseminate knowledge that Britain is making a serious effort to ensure students who study in the UK will be safe from crime. Driving home this message, the British Government has created neighbourhood policing teams with responsibility for campuses and halls of residences. This effort was initially trialled at Cardiff University, where research revealed that it reduced student crime victimisation by 60% and on 1<sup>st</sup> October 2008 it was instituted across the whole of Britain.

The progressiveness of the British approach to international student is beginning to attract broader attention, albeit belatedly, in Australia.

## **Australia**

The proactive approach to international student safety embraced by Britain and New Zealand was not immediately emulated in Australia despite the fact that Australian Education International (AEI) has found safety is a very important “influencing factor in deciding to study in Australia” and only 75% of students in Australia are satisfied with the provisions made for their safety (AEI 2007). Adherence to the strategy of denial continued to be sustained through to the end of 2008 in the face of academic, media and police reports that argued consistently that there was a systemic problem with international student safety in Australia (Tulloch 2007; Johnston 2007; Ehrenberg 2008). The prevailing ‘head-in-the-sand’ attitude was exemplified in 2007 when a teacher complained to the Australian Crime Commission (ACC) that the international students he had been teaching were being defrauded by a rogue provider. Investigation of such activities is not normally part of the ACC’s brief but on this occasion its officers took up the issue. They did so both because the teacher had reported the alleged fraud to the relevant regulator and not received a satisfactory response and the ACC itself had earlier reported to the regulator that education suppliers were using the student visa system to staff the sex industry and received a similar reaction (McKenzie 2007).

From 2005, the tendency for Australia’s education suppliers and regulators to avoid debate on international student safety induced a growing body of criticism from academics and journalists. Indeed, by 2008 stories of international student exploitation and threats to the safety of student life and property were being reported on a regular basis in the news media and beginning to appear in academic journals. These critical commentators were motivated by concern for the students’ wellbeing, and by a conviction that avoidance of the safety issue was socially irresponsible and serious threat to the sustainability of a major export industry (Nyland et al, 2008; Das 2008, 2008a, 2008b).

The warnings issued by those who insisted Australia was failing to accord international student safety the attention warranted were ignored or waved aside by the industry and its regulators. This was a response deviated from only when these managers were shocked by the intervention of a number of embassy officials. Concerned at the growing number of negative reports being provided by the media and their citizens, through 2008 a growing number of embassy officials advised the Australian government they were dissatisfied at the attention being accorded the safety of international students. Initially, these comments were advanced in private but in August 2008 China’s officials called openly for “better protection for students after receiving reports of a high number of robberies and assaults.” (Levett 2008). To the embarrassment of state and university officials this call was made at a seminar held in the New South Wales Parliament and attended by 150 newly-arrived Chinese students. At this gathering, the Australian officials gave the gathered students the routine assurance that their safety was being prioritised and advised that if they took reasonable precautions safety would not be a problem. At this point China’s officials intervened advising that the consulate had surveyed 100 Chinese students and found “more than one in four had been a victim of crime, 20 had been burgled at home and six had been robbed, several at knifepoint.” As Levett (2008) reports:

The Sydney officials’ efforts were undermined by Zhou Bo, the Chinese education consul, who gave the students a long list of nasty incidents involving overseas students, from murder and assault to a drowning in the sea. He told of a student in Burwood robbed four times and a western Sydney student killed in her house while she was on the internet. By the time he had finished, the initial nervous giggles had

turned to gasps of fright. ... Mr Zhou said the situation was serious and the consulate wanted the Government to improve students' safety.

With its intervention, China's embassy repeated the approach undertaken earlier by its New Zealand counterpart. In short, having made an initial statement, its officials paused to see if an adequate response would be forthcoming and when they judged this had not occurred escalated their involvement. Six weeks after the Parliament House debacle the Chinese ambassador, Zhang Junsai, declared in a public lecture at Sydney University that his government was unhappy with the pastoral care being provided the 112,000 Chinese students studying in Australia. This time the issues raised were legal and illegal forms of exploitation in the housing market and students' ability to gain work experience with the ambassador insisting that he believed Chinese students "deserve better" than what they were receiving (Armitage 2008).

Following these consular interventions AEI held a workshop in Shanghai intended to convince China's government that international student welfare was being accorded the attention it deserved and Victoria's State Government created an *Overseas Student Experience Task Force*. The latter body was asked to "review the overseas student experience in Victoria to see what more can be done to improve the experience" (Study Melbourne 2008). The notion that these steps were a sign Australia's education suppliers and regulators had begun to accord international student safety the attention warranted, however, was met with widespread scepticism. This doubt was fuelled by the fact that management of the safety issue was allotted to a back-bench state parliamentarian, the Taskforce members were informed in background papers that the investigation had been initiated because of negative media reporting, the relevant federal minister and the head of Education Australia continued insisting through the time the Taskforce was conducting its investigation that there was no systemic student safety problem (Gooch 2008); the CEO of AEI was rebuked by industry representatives when she cautiously suggested Australia should consider embracing a "Third Phase of International Education" that would emphasise sustainability as well as growth (Buffington 2008); and the AEI Shanghai workshop was reported to be an exercise in spin rather than a serious dialogue on how international student wellbeing could be assured. Commenting on the latter event one Australian delegate informed the authors the Chinese participants gave priority to student safety both in relevant sessions and in the closing plenary. Unfortunately for Australia, an independent eye-witness reported to Chinese readers that Australia's representatives responded poorly to this openness:

**Refreshing approach of the day:** The Chinese candidness about problems they've had with international students and 'bad news stories' such as students being victims of local crime. The Australian side, on the other hand, turned on the spin when it came to international student safety in Australia. My beautiful homeland down under is safer than many other places, no doubt, but it is certainly not a safe haven: many international students are affected by petty and beyond-petty crime, and I have taped assertions to prove it. I hope the denials are only for the sake of maintaining a positive public perception, and not an actual policy position (Suren 2008).

Why Australian industry officials continued avoiding serious discussion of international student safety given they were certainly aware of the disastrous impact China's intervention had on the New Zealand market appears to be a consequence of the fact that Australia had put in place a reputation management strategy that appeared to insulate the Australian industry from shocks of this nature. Australian confidence appears to have been underpinned by the following:

1. Profit maximisation is the primary key performance indicator for the industry and raising safety consciousness might have a negative impact on income flow;

2. international student numbers were growing at a healthy level and this would continue as the global economy was flourishing;
3. negative stories regarding the security of international students in Australia did not appear to be impacting negatively on sales;
4. the level of satisfaction international students accorded their Australian experience was high even if not as high as was the case in NZ and the UK;
5. Australia would need to sustain a steady and large inflow of skilled immigrants long into the future.

The migration assumption is the factor that differentiates the Australia situation from that in Russia, the USA, NZ and the UK and that renders rational, even if socially irresponsible, Australian officials' refusal to join the growing international student safety debate. In brief, it appears Australia's officials believed the migration program provided an alternative reputation management regime that would ensure the sustainability of the education export sector irrespective of whether or not Australia was perceived to be a safe study destination. Through the first decade of the new century Australia's immigration and education programs were intimately entwined and as a result international students who graduated from an Australian education institution were able to gain permanent residency with an ease not available in any other nation that was a major exporter of international education (Tremblay 2005). This fact was well known to prospective and resident international students (Archer and Bush 2008) and was an opportunity they grasped with enthusiasm. AEI (2008) reports that in "2007, 78% of international respondents either had applied for (30%) or planned to apply (48%) for permanent resident status in Australia".

Given the assumption that the size of the migration program would be sustained, Australian university managers and regulators could with justification reason that there was no systemic safety problem that threatened their primary objective of maintaining a continued income flow from international students. To reiterate, there was no problem, for even should the nation's reputation for being able to provide a safe environment be sullied the inflow of student customers would be sustained because by Australia's reputation for being a nation more open to migration than any other major education exporter. Indeed, if desired this inflow could be increased as, like monetary policy, the education-migration link had the great attribute that it could be tweaked if it was deemed necessary to change the magnitude and direction of the international student inflow. Given these circumstances, Australian international education leaders and regulators could reasonably conclude there was no reason to emulate the safety centred sustainability strategies being developed by competitor nations. In other words, while the education-immigration strategy may have been deficient in corporate social responsibility terms it made good business sense to individuals whose primary objective was to maximise profit. Rather, it made good sense until the assumption that the migration program would be sustained was brought into question when on the 9<sup>th</sup> October 2008, the Prime Minister "raised the possibility of slashing Australia's record high intake of migrants should the global financial crisis plunge the economy into a sustained downturn" (Maley and Edwards 2008).

With the Prime Minister's announcement it became clear the assumption that the sustainability of the international education industry could be adequately underpinned by offering permanent residency had been heroic if not naïve. That this had been the case was noted by Archer and Bush (2008) of i-Graduate immediately prior to the Prime Minister's announcement. These two observers had warned that should the immigration program be curtailed Australia's attractiveness as an international student study destination would be greatly diminished. That this would happen belatedly dawned quickly on Australian university managers as the rapidly became aware that capitalist markets are volatile to an

extend for which they had not allowed. Shocked at the idea they might have to compete in the global market place by relying on a favourable exchange rate and a capacity to provide a high quality academic experience and safe study environment, industry representatives called on the government to protect their industry by sustain the migration program at what were historically high levels (Bebbington 2008). These protectionist appeals were still being formulated when an example of how vulnerable the industry might become without the migration prop when an incident of appalling proportions befell four young international students studying in Sydney. This disaster occurred on the same day that Australia's officials were attempting to spin their counterparts at the conference in Shanghai. On the 28<sup>th</sup> October an intruder forced his way into the apartment of the four students and raped all four of these young people at knife point. In the process a girl of eighteen died and a boy of nineteen suffered permanent spinal injuries when in desperation they fell naked from a balcony as they sought to flee their tormentor. Within twenty-four hours the savagery inflicted on these four innocents had been reported around the world in hundreds of media outlets and Australian industry leaders and regulators were hanging their heads in despair at what had happened and the impact these events were likely to have on Australia's reputation in the market place.

Following the calamity of the 28<sup>th</sup> October the mother of the girl who died in the attack came to Sydney for her daughter's funeral. While in Australia her lawyer announced the family intended to establish a fund to instruct newly arrived international students about how to remain safe in an Australian context. The family did so because they felt inadequate attention was being accorded this need by Australian authorities and because they wanted "all overseas students and the public to know that safety issues for overseas students is very, very important." (cited in Tibbits and Robinson 2008)

That a bereaved family believed this initiative needed to be taken is a disastrous comment on the notion that denial constitutes an acceptable student safety management strategy and is nothing less than a marketing catastrophe. Buffeted by the Sydney calamity continuing criticism from academics and the media at the end of 2008 the education export sector at last began to indicate that it might willing to move beyond denial and spin. In December industry and government representatives organised a meeting in Melbourne with consular representatives from China, Indonesia and India. The consular invitees were asked to provide information and advice on issues and problems facing their international students and university and government representatives responded by indicating what they were doing in relevant areas and how they would address gaps that were identified. With this meeting the age of denial in Australia hopefully came to an end and the Australian industry and their regulators, even if belatedly and reluctantly, accepted they needed to join with Russia, the US, NZ and the UK in working to build the practice and theory needed to provide for the safety of international students. This is an effort bound to be advanced with reluctance for the decision to prioritise safety has been forced on these actors by others. However, it is a process that will advance and will do so for three primary reasons. First, because it has become apparent that the immigration program cannot accord the education export industry the sustainability it needs to remain viable. Second, critics of the strategy of denial will continue their efforts to show that sacrificing student safety to profitability is both immoral and a major threat to the industry. Third, foreign embassies are being encouraged by their own citizens to pressure the Australian government to accord student safety increased attention and have opened a direct dialogue with the critics of denial.

## **CONCLUSION**

No safety regime can ensure international students will never become crime victims or that the image of a nation or an institution will never be tarnished by negative media stories. However, a sophisticated and comprehensive system of safety management can reduce the

likelihood that students will be victimised and increase a nation's capacity to withstand the type of shock imposed on New Zealand by China. That China did intervene to protect its citizens in 2003 is greatly to its credit as is the fact that its officials have openly acknowledged that international students can be perpetrators of crime and that China is experiencing difficulties keeping its own international students safe from harm by others. The Chinese intervention is an important lesson for it has highlighted to host governments that if they fail to provide for their student customers it will not only be the market that may inflict a serious penalty. Recognising this is the case, NZ, the UK and belatedly Australia have begun the processes that are required if a robust debate on international student safety is to be constructed. With this debate, an environment can be created within which it will eventually be possible to build the concepts, practices, and programs needed to provide effectively for the safety needs of international students.

Regrettably, the transformation that is occurring is not a consequence of an emergent concern for student wellbeing in any of the countries studied. Rather, industry leaders and their regulators have made the necessary shift because they fear that ceasing to provide adequately for the safety needs of international students can put at risk the benefits made possible by the continuing inflow of these students. Nonetheless, while the breakthrough may not have occurred for socially responsible reasons, it is a welcome occurrence as international students will ultimately benefit. The bridgehead having been established, it is now of vital importance that it be consolidated and extended with all speed. This will not be easy for as the New Zealand Race Relations Commissioner highlighted, even in countries that have been seriously shocked and where industry managers and regulators accept there is a need to actively work to improve student safety, resistance to open debate remains. A serious advance is possible, however, if critics remain vocal in insisting student safety must not be sacrificed to profitability, if significant participants in the international education market strive to gain or preserve market share by highlighting their capacity to provide a safe study destination, and if the governments of sender nations continue pressuring host countries to ensure their students are provided for adequately. In this context, those who remain fearful that a open debate on international student safety will generate information and insights that might undermine their profitability can be subsumed and an environment created in which a strategy of denial and evasion is unsustainable and a willingness to sacrifice student safety to the need to "build the business" is perceived to be reprehensible.

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