

## **GUARDIAN-SPENDER CONFLICT AND THE PROVISION OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES**

**Helen Forbes-Mewett and Chris Nyland**

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### **Abstract**

Australian universities have become entrepreneurial organisations in order to sell education to many thousands of international students. For on-campus students living and studying in their host country, the provision of support services is imperative and the proportion of resources universities allocate to student welfare is an issue of dispute. This case study focuses on how the debate has unfolded in one large Australian university. Utilising 55 in-depth interviews with University staff, the paper considers the strategies and structures of student support services during a period in which the University radically transformed the provision of international student support services. The study reveals divergent goals and conflict between two groups of staff – those who provide international student support services and senior management who have responsibility for overall university strategy and sustainability. Wildavsky's (1974) 'guardian-spender' framework is utilised to examine an existing tension between senior managers who oversee the spending of university funds and frontline staff who argue that a greater level of financial resources is required to adequately provide services to international students. The paper contributes to an emerging debate concerning the merits of providing specialised or mainstreamed student services. Evidence to date suggests specialised services best provide for international students and that the University's decision to provide generic services to all students was ill-informed and financially based.

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# GUARDIAN-SPENDER CONFLICT AND THE PROVISION OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES

## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Power and conflict is alive and well in Australian universities. Behaving as entrepreneurial organisations, the universities compete in a volatile education market in order to sell education to international students. The need for universities to be enterprising has meant organisational structures are continually challenged and senior executives are afforded the increased power allegedly required in a commercial environment (Marginson and Considine 2000). These circumstances reflect ideas of 'efficiency, performance monitoring, target-setting and private-sector models of running organisations', a body of influences that form what Deem (2007: 5) refers to as *New Managerialism*. This notion highlights the growing divide between academic professionals and managers that unfolded as universities sought to incorporate private sector management principles. As a consequence, university managers have accrued increased power. The economics of the environment tends to conceal a close reflexive interrelationship between universities' need to attract a continued flow of international students for income and the need to provide support services to increase the likelihood of students' success. By drawing attention to the value of the non-economic aspects, Mazzarol and Soutar (2001) point to the need to broaden the provision of international student security beyond the academic experience. However, the adoption of this notion by universities would come at an economic cost in times when resources are in deficit. To use the colourful language of Bok (2003: 9): 'Universities share one characteristic with compulsive gamblers and exiled royalty: there is never enough money to satisfy their desires'. To provide student support services is but one desire of university managers.

This paper is based on a case study of one of Australia's largest universities, which will be referred to simply as 'the University'. Almost 30 per cent of the University's student cohort is classified as 'international', of which some 10,000 are hosted on-campus in Australia. The concerns of this study impact on the latter group. In a similar vein to Kelly and Wanna's (2000) work relating to government budgeting, the paper adapts Wildavsky's (1974) 'guardian-spender' framework to explore the management of university international student support services. Within this context, the paper considers the provision of international student services during a period when organisational structures for delivering support services underwent changes that revealed divergent goals that created tension between two groups of staff – those who provided international student support services and senior management. While Wildavsky (1974) presented a relatively simply dichotomy between guardians and spenders, the model allows sufficient flexibility to be applied to circumstances where the balance of power rests with the financial guardians (Kelly and Wanna 2000). With a strong hold on the university purse, the guardians exercise the 'legitimate use of power' (Giddens 1997: 339), which points to an 'underlying conflict' that contrasts the interests and desires of the two identified staff groups (Raven and Kruglanski 1970: 70). In line with Gaski (1984: 11), the use of "conflict" refers only to the perception that another is being obstructive, with tension the implicit accompaniment'. The revealed conflict is vertical, a form which tends to arise when 'superiors attempt to control the behavior of subordinates, and subordinates resist such control' (Pondy 1967: 314). In this environment, a classic 'guardian-spender' relationship with associated tensions is evitable. The guardians dominate senior administrative positions and use their control over budgeting to allocate resources in a manner they believe will best suit the universities multiple needs. Within this context, while frontline staff (the spenders) strive to provide the highest quality services they can given the limited resources allocated by the guardians.

Butcher and McGrath (2004) highlight the importance of providing resources for international student support staff to create 'bridges' to overcome the many barriers faced by students in a foreign environment. The goal of this staff group is to guard the welfare of the students rather than University finances. Insignificant attention has been paid to the conflict arising from the two main

perspectives regarding the need for bridge-building. That is, the spenders who believe specialised services provide the necessary bridges for international students to succeed, and the guardians (of the university purse) who argue that international students do not need 'bridges' and should therefore be provided for in the same manner as domestic students.

This paper contributes to an emerging debate concerning the merits of providing specialised or mainstreamed student services. Adding support to the perspective of frontline staff, it is argued that a greater level of financial resources is required to adequately provide services to international students. Furthermore, it is concluded that specialised services best provide for international students and that the University's decision to provide generic services to all students was ill-informed and financially based. These elements underpin an existing conflict between those who support and deal with international students on a daily basis and senior management who have little or no contact with the students. Both have similar goals but differing immediate objectives and, hence, emphasis – one dominated by the need to protect international students, the other by the need to protect all students as well as entire organisation. This variance is shown to be source of contention directly related to the provision of resources. It will also be shown that the views of support service staff with extensive knowledge and experience in dealing with international student matters were not taken into account when major decisions relating to international student services were made.

The empirical content of this paper is based on 55 face-to-face interviews with University staff and senior management. The taped interviews were conducted on-campus and were generally between 45 and 90 minutes duration. After transcription, they were analysed manually with the development of themes in mind. The emerging themes sat within three broad areas - mainstreaming international student services, international student security preparation, and international student continuing needs. This paper focuses on the area of mainstreaming international student services, which is a process that assumes the problems of international and domestic students are largely homogenous. Mainstreaming is based on a belief that neither group normally requires specialised assistance. Whether support services that provide for the security of international students should be mainstreamed or specialised remains an unsettled and contentious question. Nonetheless, the financial guardians of the University decided to proceed with the mainstreaming approach.

## **MAINSTREAMING INTERNATIONAL STUDENT SERVICES**

The decision shift from the provision of specialised services for international students to a generic mainstreamed model was made by the University's senior managers – the guardians of the University purse. It was noted, however, that the financial guardians had little or no contact with the international student cohort or knowledge of their needs. This claim was supported by almost all interviewees including the senior managers who participated in the decision to mainstream services: 'I don't have direct responsibility for international students, but obviously they are the essence of our activity' (P26 Management). Despite being a contributor to major decisions reflecting on the international student cohort, Participant 26 made it clear direct contact with international students was not part of the brief associated with the management position held. Providing compelling evidence of the superficial relationship between the financial 'guardians' and international students, one Participant commented: 'I suppose I shake an awful lot of hands of international students at the graduation ceremonies, that's not pretty personal, nothing that's actually an intense personal relationship' (P43 Management).

It became apparent that it was from this uninformed position the University financial guardians decided to mainstream international student services. The decision defies both Perin's (2002) caution that mainstreamed departments may deny specific groups are in deficit and Hargreaves (2007) warning that overconfident reformers often dismiss rather than learn from the past. The work of both Perin and Hargreaves wisely suggests that structural changes to student support services should be knowledge-based.

It was not surprising that staff who had dedicated themselves to providing support to international students responded negatively to the mainstreaming of international student services. They rejected the management view that domestic and international student needs are much the same and that the latter's requirements can almost always be adequately provided as part of a generalised service. Indeed, the following view was common: 'We felt very strongly we should remain as a stand alone unit devoted specifically to internationals (P1 Support Staff). Another interviewee elaborated:

... this was a huge issue that we grappled with ... there was all this management idea of internationals and locals should be treated the same, they should have the same services, they're not different, they might be internationals and locals, but that's it - there's no major differences, they're both people, they're both students they're both studying. And I think that's ridiculous because they come from a different country, they don't have their family, they're without best friends, different language, different culture, there's so much pressure on them that locals don't have ... And yes I think they do need the international student services ... [they] need some sort of specialised services to help them cope (P18 Support Staff).

As the above quote attests, support staff was convinced that a great many internationals were in need of specialised support services. This was particularly so in relation to English proficiency and ability to come to grips with the Australian educational system and social environment. Nonetheless, 'the access of spenders to decision-making on expenditure' for these purposes was thwarted (Kelly and Wanna 2000: 42).

Challenged by deficient funding, support staff indicated that they coped as best they could by 'going the extra mile'. The following example demonstrates the commitment sustained by support staff and the tendency for the University to implement strategies that allowed students to enroll who were either unprepared or unsuitable for international study:

There's a lot of pre-existing illness ... I had a case a couple of years ago where I had to take a student back to their home country [because of severe psychological illness], ... we found out later on that this student had been returned from a United States university and I don't know how they got into this country because they're supposed to say whether they've got pre-existing illnesses or pre-existing episodes ... I think we've chased the dollar too much and we haven't provided the service ... (P6 Support Services).

These extreme but not isolated circumstances highlight the importance of the work by both Massie (2008) and Haas et al. (2003) that focused on student mental health problems and suicide. The circumstances also show that staff offered services beyond the call of duty, particularly when dealing with students who arrived in Australia unprepared or ill, as in the case above. Furthermore, the example gives an indication of the frustration experienced by support staff that was often left to pick up the pieces from what appears to be careless recruiting resulting from a management strategy to increase international student income.

Prior to the restructure involved with the mainstreaming of services, both support and academic staff were generally convinced that the assistance provided to international students was of high quality, albeit in short supply. However, this view was offset by general agreement there was a deficiency due to insufficient resources. Peak times when assessments were due were frequently a problem with support staff unable to cope with demand. Language support staff commonly reported that international students often presented at peak times in a state described as 'either very distressed or very upset' (P1 Support Staff). Although available to all students, language support services tended to be primarily a source of assistance accessed by international students. Nonetheless, the support program was reduced and centralised during the introduction of mainstreaming. The conflict arising from this process was aired publicly in the media with support staff strongly criticising management's approach to student support (P9 Student Support).

Conflict resulting from the dichotomy between spenders and guardians was not considered by Wildavsky (1974) as problematic; however, this does not hold true in the current study. The following view relating to the pre-mainstreaming period supports the notion that specialised services provided well for international students, and also indicates that the approach taken by the University's financial guardians was problematic:

I think in some areas [the University] is better than any other ... and I congratulate the University on that. But still, it's all done behind a curtain because we don't want to have any kind of negative impact on the earning capacity of overseas students (P41 Student Support).

Evidence regarding the problems associated with the dichotomy of guardian-spender views often referred to the earning capacity of the University, as further evidenced by the following comment: 'The money hasn't been put into the services. It's going to be a big task for [the University] now because to build the services up to meet the needs of this market because the problems have become more severe' (P6 Student Services). This view was elaborated:

Today we need to do a little bit more for international students than we have in the past. The reason that's happened is maybe because we're finding a lot more failing. We've had more difficulties; we're finding more students that aren't coping. Severe emotional problems. There's a number of people talking about perhaps we need to look at our intake as far as selection and how we select these students and just don't take the numbers, that we start to look at not quantity but quality of students. Whether they've got the skills to deal with a university education in Australia and not just go for numbers and for dollars. I think that's the injustice I think that's happened in Australia overall, they've just taken them because of the dollar. A lot of them haven't then put money back into providing the service that these students need (P6 Student Services).

Staff wishing to access a greater level of resources to provide international student support presented their views passionately. They consistently made comment that indicated their discontent with management's fund allocation, which led to inadequate student support. Indeed, the following account indicates that international students were treated unfairly:

... it is widely believed that at least some of the funds earned by the Faculty from international student fees should be reinvested in the provision of language and learning services for the students ... the danger I think is that we use them as cash cows; we pull them in, do 'em cheap, shoot them out there ... (P43 Academic).

While understanding the need to take an economically efficient approach, the view of Participant 43 was clearly in conflict with the approach of senior management that limited the allocation of resources to international student support. Furthermore, the management approach was viewed as short-sighted and disregarding of the fact that the University is reliant on student fees:

And nobody cares enough to actually keep saying look at the budgets, look how much we need to invest on this particular cohort of students if they're to continue to hold the University up.... It's outrageous; it's shocking business management.... I think it's almost unethical how universities handle their student fees at the moment (P43 Academic).

A student support staff member commented that management is focused 'on the bottom line and managerial efficiencies', rather than student welfare (P19 Student Services). When asked 'Do they consult you?' The response was scathing:

Management? Shit, no. There's no consultative mechanism at the University for normal everyday workers... I think they're running an enterprise and like any management they'll collect their information and make decisions based on that information. I think even though

there was a rash of consultation over the last two years, little has been done with it ... [it] showed quite clearly that more resources were necessary. However, the step that was taken was to actually cut the resources and to change the rhetoric. So I suppose it is almost a philosophy of 'needs must'. The needs are we don't have enough money; therefore we mustn't have this problem (P19 Student Services).

The hope of support staff to obtain sufficient funding to provide a greater level of support to international students was dashed by management's decision to mainstream student services. Earlier intervention by the National Tertiary Education Union, which had stepped in at the request of staff afraid they might lose their status as international student advisors meant specialised services were maintained for a short period of time. The employees' resistance, however, was subsequently undermined by the resignation of staff as they became aware their fears would eventually be realised. The process was accentuated by the appointment of a new manager to oversee the implementation of mainstreamed support services. The role and use of power of senior management ensured the new support structures were not hindered by staff with different perspectives on how best to provide for international students.

## **CONCLUSION**

Using Wildavsky's guardian-spender framework, this paper addressed the notions of power and conflict in the context of the University as an entrepreneurial organisation. The provision of student support services was subject to the associated influences of private sector organisational models that were based primarily on efficiency. The way in which student support services were provided was a contentious issue attributed to a scarcity of resources. Empirical evidence focusing on a dichotomy of views relating to how best to provide international student services revealed an existing conflict between frontline staff (the spenders) who provided support services to international students and senior management (the guardians) who allocated the University resources. Frontline staff wished to spend increased amounts on specialised support services because they believed the model more adequately provided for the students. By contrast, senior management held the view that international students were not 'in deficit' and therefore mainstream services were sufficient. With similar goals, both groups were influenced by the need to protect students; however, the management group had the additional responsibility of protecting the organisation in its entirety. Ironically, it was shown that senior managers with little or no international student contact were responsible for the decision to mainstream international student support services. Support staff with much knowledge of and experience with international student issues were not consulted in regards to the development of the new mainstreamed student support system. This exclusion may have been related to the fact that support staff held strong views that specialised services were required for international students. The tension between international student support staff and management escalated when it became clear that the employment of staff was under threat and that management used its power to ensure that the new developments went unheeded. Nonetheless, compelling evidence from frontline staff has led to the conclusion that a greater level of financial resources was required to adequately provide services to international students. It was further concluded that specialised services best provide for international student needs and that the University's decision to provide generic services to all students was ill-informed and financially based.

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