

International vocational education and training—The migration and learning mix

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International VET students have divergent, shifting and in some cases multiple purposes for undertaking their VET courses. Students' motives may be instrumental and/or intrinsic and can include obtaining permanent residency, accumulating skills that can secure good employment, gaining a foothold that leads to higher education, and/or personal transformation. Moreover, students' study purposes and imagining of acquired values are neither fixed nor unitary. They can be shaped and reshaped by their families and personal aspirations and by the social world and the learning environment with which they interact. We argue that, whatever a student's study purpose, s/he needs to engage in a learning practice and should be provided with a high quality education. Indeed, we insist this remains the case even if students enrol only in order to gain the qualifications needed to migrate. The paper details the

association between migration and learning, and argues that the four variations emerging from the empirical data of this study that centre on migration and skills' accumulation better explain this association than does the 'international VET students simply want to migrate' perspective. We conclude with a discussion of why the stereotype that holds VET international students are mere 'PR hunters' is unjust and constitutes a threat to the international VET sector.

Key words: VET, international education, migration, study purposes, learning experiences

Introduction

In 2009, the extent to which the international VET sector has grown was brought to public attention by the charge that many colleges were catering to students who enrolled primarily to gain permanent residency (PR) and were producing poorly trained graduates (Marginson *et al.* 2010, Perkins 2009, Smith 2010). Responding to these charges, the Australian government amended the General Skilled Migration Scheme in ways that curtailed subjects popular with many international VET students, limited graduates' ability to gain immigrant status and required independent skills testing of graduates. These regulatory changes were widely applauded, but a number of observers warned that highlighting the poor quality of 'dodgy' private colleges risked labelling all international VET students as 'PR chasers' who have no real interest in study and hence increased the chances they will emerge as poor graduates (Mares 2009).

In this article we discuss the validity of the claim that international VET students simply want to migrate and are disinterested in the quality of their education (Birrell & Perry 2009, Birrell *et al.* 2009, Perkins 2009, Baas 2006) by drawing on interviews with 130 international students, teachers, general staff, directors and

CEOs from 22 public and private VET providers in three Australian states. We argue international VET students have divergent, shifting and in some cases multiple purposes for undertaking their chosen course of study. These motives may be instrumental and/or intrinsic, and can include obtaining permanent residency, accumulating skills that can secure good employment, gaining a foothold that leads to higher education, and/or personal transformation. We suggest, moreover, that students' study purposes and imagining of acquired values are neither fixed nor unitary. They can be shaped and reshaped by their families and personal aspirations and by the social world and the learning environment. We hold that whatever a student's study purpose is, s/he should be provided access to a high quality education. Indeed, we insist this remains the case, even if students enrol only in order to gain the qualifications needed to migrate. This is necessary because the education supplier has accepted their fees, there exists no sure way of knowing why a student elects to enrol, the motivators informing students can change, and because, as Smith (2010: 8) rightly observes, 'an immigration focus was not a crime'. Given this is the case, it is important that scholars, educators and policy-makers have a sound theoretical and empirical understanding of how teachers and VET providers can facilitate international students' engagement in learning and ensure high quality outcomes. The paper begins by introducing the literature that has examined why international students study in the VET sector. We then proceed to detail the association between migration and learning, and argue that four variants that centre on migration and skills' accumulation better explain this association than does the 'international VET students simply want to migrate' perspective. We conclude with a discussion of why the stereotype that holds that VET students are mere 'PR hunters' is unjust and constitutes a threat to the international VET sector.

International students' motives for undertaking VET courses

In 2009 VET became the largest education supplier by volume of enrolments and commencements (AEI 2009a). Asian markets dominated this activity, representing 85% of all VET enrolments with India being the lead market with a 29% share followed by China with 7%. 'Management and Commerce' were the most popular courses with 55% of enrolments, 'Food, Hospitality and Personal Services' ranked second with 17% followed by 'Society and Culture' with 10%. Most VET enrolments were with non-government providers (84%) and 16% were enrolled in state institutions (AEI 2009b).

VET's emergence as the largest education exporter catalysed speculation that the growth of the sector was being spurred by a rapid increase in the number of institutions that exist primarily to assist individuals attain residency rather than provide a genuine learning experience—in short, 'PR factories'. This was a charge fed by scholars who highlighted the large number of international students studying hairdressing and cookery (Birrell & Perry 2009, Birrell et al. 2009). These authors claimed that this fast growth was closely associated with the advantage that Australia's skilled migration program accords international students who complete their studies in certain areas of 'Food, Hospitality and Personal Services'. Those who assert immigration is the primary determinant influencing when and what VET international students elect to study can rightly point to quantitative and qualitative data that has shown VET students emphasise the possibility that they might be able to migrate. In 2007, Education International (AEI) reported 51% of VET respondents had stated that the wish to migrate was an important or very important factor influencing their study location decision and 38% conceded a migration agent had been an important 'influencer' assisting them to make the decision as to where and what to study (AEI 2007).

Commentators who emphasise the promise of migration when discussing why VET students study in Australia have also been informed by qualitative data. Notable in this regard is the work of Baas (2006) who draws on 200 interviews with Indian students and host professionals in Melbourne. His basic hypothesis is that Indian students' 'main objective is to obtain a permanent residence visa in Australia and ... they tailor their choice of course and university with this end in mind' (p. 1). Baas divides Indian students into a number of groups, the first of which initially had no intention of migrating or did not know this opportunity existed but subsequently became aware of the possibility. A second group arrived with the intention of gaining PR but also wished to gain skills. Both of these groups were deeply concerned about the quality of the education they received. However, a third and rapidly growing body of students was focused only on PR and had little or no concern about education quality except to the extent that this would assist them gain the qualifications required to migrate. Although Baas concedes that the first and second groups are concerned about the quality of their education, his message is that the key driver is permanent residency and the education received is of marginal significance. This message is driven home by the minimal attention he accords students' aspiration for skills enhancement, intellectual formation, career advancement and personal enrichment.

AEI did not allow students the option of identifying migration as an influence when explaining their course selection in their survey (AEI 2007). Nevertheless, commentators highlighted the fact that a significant minority of students had chosen on the list of occupations those that gain maximum migration points but for which there may be little demand in their home country. While this practice is understandable, it unfortunately distracts attention from the fact that international VET students overwhelmingly provide answers to why they have chosen their courses similar to those that are key determinants for domestic students. With the latter,

primary influences are the possibility of employment advancement, personal aspiration and opportunity to progress to higher education (Blair *et al.* 1993, cited in Connelly & Halliday 2001, Connelly & Halliday 2001, Maxwell *et al.* 2000). International VET students, by contrast, report the issues that influence their course selection include employment (86%), course reputation (84%), reputation of institution (83%), and fees (82%). Moreover, and importantly, nearly all VET respondents (93%) indicate the quality of education is an important or very important motivator (AEI 2007: 15).

Bourdieu's concept of 'cultural capital' as a form of investment for students' future

Recent research has generated a broader understanding of the motivations and experiences of international students through the concepts of investment and imagined community (e.g. Norton 2001, Norton & Toohey 2002, Arkoudis & Love 2008). Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of 'cultural capital', Norton and Toohey (2002: 122) argue that why and how learners invest in their course links to their desire to 'acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which in turn increase the value of their cultural capital'. Their argument underpins the connection of students' investment in a specific course, their purposes for so doing and their adaptation. This important relationship has, however, been examined mainly in the context of learners in English as a Second Language or English for Academic Purposes courses and has gone largely unexplored in the literature on international students in Australian VET. Within the distinctive context of Australian VET, Bourdieu's notion of 'cultural capital' can have different variations which are linked to the opportunity for personal transformation and cultural enrichment, employment advancement, possibility to proceed to higher education and opportunity to migrate.

The concept of investment focuses on the learner as an agent with a complex and mobile social history, multiple values and the capacity to organise and re-organise a sense of place and value in the social world (Arkoudis & Love 2008). However, discussion on VET international students' study purposes has made sweeping generalisations and implies uniformity in relation to international students' course selection. Analysing the link between students' values and purpose for investing in their course and their learning experiences can offer an alternative conceptual view from which to examine international students' learning adaptation and provide new and deeper insights into their learning practices in VET.

In sum, the literature suggests that, even if the course chosen by a VET student is influenced by a wish to migrate, it is highly likely the student will also be swayed by the desire for a positive learning experience. Highlighting this revelation is of the greatest importance. For if educators and policy-makers mistakenly believe VET international students have enrolled merely to meet migration requirements, they are unlikely to provide the commitment and resources individuals have the right to receive both as students and customers. In the next section of the paper, we discuss the methodology shaping the study and draw on the voices of VET international students to clarify the association between migration and learning.

Methodology

Drawing on qualitative data, the study explores the complexities of students' perceptions regarding their motivations to undertake their VET study. Moreover, a qualitative inquiry is appropriate for the nature of this study since it focuses on insights, discovery and interpretation rather than hypothesis testing (Merriam 1998: 28).

The research draws on the views of 130 interviewees including 105 international students and 25 teachers, support staff, international program managers and CEOs from 22 VET providers in New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria. Among the student participants, 46 are female and 59 are male.

The first named author of the paper contacted the international students' support coordinators and international program directors from VET providers and requested them to help circulate a call for international students to participate in the study. Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions (Merriam 1998) were adopted. For a small number of student participants who were interviewed during their first two weeks following enrolment, a second round of interviews was conducted at the end of their first semester. The purpose of the second interview was to gain insight into how students are transformed in the process of adapting to the learning practices of their VET courses. The first named author of this paper also stays in touch with the participants after the interviews via email and telephone with consent in order to follow up important or emerging issues. She has also taken part in student activities, visited their homes and workplaces and participated in their workshops, practice and theory classes. The purpose of participating in these activities is to observe and understand the multiple dimensions of international students' life and study in Australia, some of which may otherwise be invisible through formal interviews.

The national origins and the VET courses in which the student interviewees were enrolled are captured in the table below:

Nation of origin	Number of interviewees	VET course	Number of interviewees
<i>South Asia</i>		Food and hospitality	40
India	22	Management & commerce	10
Other	2	Building & carpentry	16
<i>Northeast Asia</i>		Information technology	9
China	18	Hairdressing	8
Korea	10	Community welfare work	5
Japan	2	Automotive	4
<i>Southeast Asia and the Pacific</i>		Others	13
Vietnam	18	Total	105
Other (Malaysia, Philippine, Thailand)	7		
Mauritius	5		
<i>Europe and the UK</i>	12		
<i>South America</i>	3		
Others	6		
Total	105		

Ethics approval was sought prior to data collection from RMIT University Human Research Ethics Committee where the first named author is based. To protect the confidentiality of the participants, their names and institutes are kept anonymous. The face-to-face interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed and then analysed using a thematic analysis approach. The analysis was inductive and aimed to identify emergent themes and patterns.

International students' study purposes and learning experience

The data generated by the interviews uncovered four variations of the complex relationship between permanent residency and international students' motives in undertaking VET courses: some students are motivated to enrol in a VET course by a dual desire to secure PR and attain the skills associated with their chosen occupation, a second group views migration as a 'second chance opportunity'; a third sees PR as the sole reason to enrol in a VET course; and a fourth has no interest in gaining PR or has lost any interest they may once have had. In addition, as with domestic students, the data reveal personal interest, personal aspiration and the possibility of using VET as a pathway to university within Australia or employment in their home country as important to many international students. In short, the data show that, while migration is a motivator for many students, it is not present to the extent that has been suggested by numerous media commentators and by some academics.

Obtaining skills/qualifications and PR

A group of interviewees was enrolled in VET courses because they wanted to secure both PR and the qualifications needed to be successful in their chosen occupation. For example, a Filipino student enrolled in commercial cookery with a state training provider advised:

First of all, I am very interested in cooking, that's my love, my passion... And the course is also a stepping stone for permanent residency. My love for cooking makes me really interested in the course right now and the PR gives me the will to survive—it gives me the drive to try harder. (Filipino, Hospitality, TAFE, Victoria)

This student explicitly expresses that both her passion for cooking and her desire to migrate to Australia are significant elements motivating her to study in the VET sector. During the interview, she emphasised how her passion for her chosen occupation and her determination to secure permanent residency provide her with

the strength to overcome the emotional hardship of leaving her son behind with her parents in the Philippines and the need to juggle a part-time job and study. The student positions herself as being ready and empowered to respond to the challenging educational experiences she must confront in Australia and reveals that, along with her desire to secure permanent residency, she is also driven by the wish to fulfil her occupational aspiration.

Other students when asked why they had enrolled in their VET course replied they wanted both permanent residency and work skills and qualifications and in so doing observed that they did not accept these two objectives were in conflict:

To be a cabinet maker and to do a trade, but it's not so easy to get an apprenticeship in Germany as a girl. So I came to Australia. And of course, I also want to immigrate.
(German, Cabinet making, TAFE, QLD)

The main reason is for getting permanent residency because I've been in Australia for two years, like, on holiday visas, working holiday. And then at the end of that I went back to England in July last year and there's not much happening in England and I wanted to come back to Australia... And I thought I wanted to do a course that is going to give me something at the end of it, not just come for no reason. I want to enrol in something that is going to get me a job. So I looked into doing mechanics automotive. And yeah, I want to get permanent residency at the end, so I can stay over here. It's good fun. Yeah, that's one of the reasons I took the course because so I've always been around cars since I was little.
(England, Automotive, TAFE, QLD)

From the first, these students had chosen an Australian VET course in the hope of attaining permanent residency and of gaining the skills and qualifications required to pursue their chosen occupation. In short, throughout their period of study, both *positional investments* and *self-transformative investments* have been of importance (Pyvis & Chapman 2007).

Permanent residency as a 'second chance opportunity'

For other students permanent residency was a prize that began to be sought only after their studies in Australia had commenced:

Now since I've been here for nearly one year and I quite like here. If I can, I would like to apply for permanent residency. Before I came here, I had no idea whether I am going to like this place or not because I've never been overseas. It is my first time. I'd never been out of my province in the South of China, near to Hong Kong. (Chinese, Hospitality, TAFE, NSW)

At that time [when the student decided to take the course], I did not think about PR, if now I can't take it, no problem. I can go back to my country and use my knowledge from here. I will try for that [for PR], if I could get it, it's good; if I don't get it, it's ok... I come here to study. I don't come here for PR. (Indian, Hospitality, private college, QLD)

These students revealed that, when they came to Australia, immigration opportunities were of little importance but, as they progressed through their course, they began to find the possibility of PR attractive. This commonly occurs because the student becomes immersed in the migration culture through interacting with peers who are applying for or have successfully gained PR. Commenting on the students who come to desire PR after arrival in Australia, Bass (2006: 11) acknowledges that some of these individuals progress along this path because they find the Australian social and natural environment attractive. However, he downplays the significance of this influence and instead elects to highlight the extent to which students develop an interest in PR because they see it as a 'form of compensation' for an unsatisfactory education experience. By so doing, he both denigrates the quality of education in Australia and conveys the impression that these 'dissatisfied customers' constitute a very large proportion of those who learn to desire PR. By contrast, none of our student interviewees saw PR as a 'form of compensation'. Rather, they invariably reported they had come to find PR attractive,

either because they like Australia or because they learn PR can be gained at little cost and consequently is a windfall prize one would be foolish not to seize.

Some students highlight that since they are interested in gaining international working experience in a context other than their home country, obtaining PR is important even if they do not intend to remain in Australia, because PR is often listed as the primary requirement in job descriptions. This group of students differs from the other groups described because, while international students in other PR-oriented groups view migration as an *outcome* of their study in Australia, for these students PR is an asset that enables them to realise a desired outcome or is seen as an *opportunity*. In this case, the acquired values that international students attached to their study in Australia are not fixed and limited to common values such as the enhancement of skills and employment advancement but have been extended to include migration. This reflects the flexible response of international students as a mobile population to the Australian government's policy on skilled migration and the potential for PR.

Initially motivated to secure PR but later on change their mind

The number of interviewees not interested in migration was also boosted by those students who initially enrolled in a VET course in order to gain PR but decided subsequently that this was not an option they wished to pursue:

Well, when I first came to Australia two years ago, I definitely thought I was going to live in this country forever... Now I am thinking I'm still young and there are so many opportunities around the world. I am going to travel around the world and actually live in different countries.

(Korean, Hospitality, TAFE, NSW)

At the very beginning I wanted to live in Australia...Yeah and now I don't show much interest about a PR because I could very easily move to America, and I think that may be fit me better...

(Chinese, Hospitality, TAFE, QLD)

These students initially saw PR as an important outcome of their study in Australia, but positioned themselves as globally mobile individuals as they came to recognise the options made possible by globalisation. For some, this change emerged from their growing confidence in themselves and the skills they acquired. Indeed, many students in commercial cookery and hairdressing reported they had enrolled because they wished to gain qualifications in an internationally mobile field and thus gain a 'global passport' that would enable them to work and settle in multiple countries. For others, Australia was initially seen as a promising land but along the way they realised the lifestyle did not well suit them. Thus, this study shows international students' imagining of the acquired values they wish to pursue via international education is neither fixed nor unitary, but can be shaped and reshaped by their changing perspectives, their learning experiences and the environment with which they interact.

PR chasing

Our interviews confirmed that there are international students who enrol in VET courses in which they have no interest other than the fact that they can generate the points required to immigrate. This was confirmed by student interviewees who commented on fellow students:

So of course I do my own reading and my own research. And so when the teacher is teaching, you know a lot more compared to someone who's not very interested and doesn't make any effort... They're here mainly for PR in the end. Yeah. So they just come, take their time. You can see the attitude. Like, they're not always on time for class. They don't participate in class. Whether they pass or not doesn't matter. You know that kind of attitude? Yeah. And then they didn't pay attention when the teacher is talking. All they want to do is, oh, let's just take the notes or let's just pass the test. (Malaysian, Bakery, private college, Victoria)

Other interviewees conceded immigration was the sole reason they chose their course but in so doing highlighted the fact that this did not mean they would not work in the relevant industry:

I enrolled in this course for immigration... No. I didn't like bakery. Now I just feel, have a little bit feeling [toward bakery]. So it's basically like people have contact with something for a long time and they have emotion in it... I just learn, yeah, it is because I said if I want to reach my PR purpose, my goal, I have to get the certificate. How can I get it? I must finish all the courses. So I have to finish all the courses and that's it. And how did I finish all the courses? Just following the teacher and listened. So I followed the teachers' instructions and do the assignments and finish exams. And that's it, finish. And now I reach my goals, I succeed. (Chinese, Bakery, TAFE, Victoria)

Indeed, other interviewees who had enrolled solely in order to gain migration points reported that their teachers had generated in them a genuine interest in the occupation.

I was very bored in cooking. And I am scared at how can I go through this course because I never done any cooking before. But the method and the method of teaching and teachers are so good that now I am feeling very confident to cooking and I can work in the industry also. I enjoy everything. I enjoy most every day. Every hour, I enjoy... They [the teachers] are taking care all the time. They are pushing students, pushing for the whole of the students. And they always checking their students are taking the skills or not. They are very friendly and they are helping but at the same time they are strict also. They don't let you go for a single time... I want to be a chef. *It's my dream now.* (Indian, Cookery, TAFE, QLD)

This course will help me to get the PR... No, in China I even don't know how to fry an egg. And my teacher, whose name is Mark, he's very nice and he's a very good teacher... Yeah, he changed me, he changed me a lot. He makes me like cooking... Because he's very friendly and his class style is very funny and active. He's very patient to teach us how to cook. Even when we make a mistake, he will help us to get through it. (Chinese, Cookery, TAFE, QLD)

These excerpts reveal that it is the teachers and VET providers that play an important role in making students interested and engaged in learning. Connelly and Halliday (2001) argue VET teachers should be responsible for taking students beyond mere instrumentalism and facilitating their engagement in learning. The students' views in this study highlight the significance of teachers' capacity to identify the study purposes of international students and their approaches to engaging students in the learning process and generating the interest of international students in the subjects, which were originally seen by these students themselves as nothing other than a means to migration. In dealing with this group of students, undoubtedly teachers' perceptions of their role and their attitudes towards this responsibility are the key to nurturing students' interest in learning, enabling them to move beyond instrumentalism and seeing migration only as an end goal, to being motivated to develop vocational skills. In so doing, teachers play an important role in legitimising student participation in the learning process (Wenger 1998). On the other hand, as revealed by some students in this study, some teachers' sweeping generalisations of all international students as solely motivated by the desire to secure PR while overlooking their genuine interest in the course, can lead to destructive attitudes and associated implications that impact negatively on international students' learning in VET courses and the teaching of international student cohorts.

Suggesting it is possible for teachers to inspire students who enrol in a subject in which they have no interest is not to claim this outcome can be achieved with all or even most students. To suggest otherwise is to place demands on teachers that are simply unreasonable and unrealistic. Indeed, it is a step bound to encourage 'teacher bashing'. Such a development would be particularly unjust in the case of teachers who are compelled to labour in colleges that are grossly under-staffed and under-equipped. In short, teachers who for

whatever reason work in 'PR factories' as described by one student interviewee in this way:

Every time when you finish your work, you have to show it to teacher and then you have to get the signature otherwise, without that signature, you did nothing, but to get signature you have to wait so many hours. Busy. Teachers are just like screaming and running. They're also got stressed as well and the teachers would regularly change [resign]. I don't think that they really want to teach the students because they thought they just waste their energy and stuff. One day I said like, "I have done this, can you just sign it and check it for me?" And the teacher would say, "Okay, do you want to be a hair designer or you just want to stay here?" And I said, "I just want to stay here." And she rolled her eyes and said, "Okay, pass."
(Japanese, Hairdressing private college, Victoria)

The private hairdressing college in which this student enrolled was the cheapest in Melbourne and recruited large numbers of international students even though it had only two teachers. There were often more than 50 students in one class and it is to the teacher's enormous credit that she asked her question and did not simply assume all her students who enrolled in a cheap course did so because they only wanted PR. But to expect that a teacher in this context should act differently when confronted by a student that confesses that she has no interest in the course would be unjust.

Accumulation of skills and qualifications

Another group of interviewees viewed their enrolment in VET solely as a means to gain the skills and qualifications required to pursue their chosen occupation and/or as a pathway to personal development. These students deemed PR an irrelevancy or, at most, a fringe benefit that might be garnered simply because it is a 'low hanging fruit', if not a windfall. For example, a Thai student explained why he had chosen to study hospitality management at a state Technical and Further Education (TAFE) college:

I'm willing to do it because I love what I do... I mean, I know I will be eligible for PR but I am not focusing into it. I am not crazy all over it because I think that is the bonus to my part. But my main point is, I have to keep myself focused on my career, profession, refining my skills and that's the most important.
(Thai, Hospitality management, TAFE, NSW)

This student worked as a pastry chef in his home country and the USA before enrolling in a diploma in hospitality management. He is motivated to study because he wishes to upgrade his skills and enhance his ability to secure rewarding and challenging employment in this chosen occupation. The following excerpts from interviews with cookery students offer further insight into the reasons why international students who are committed primarily to accumulating skills or qualifications would invest in a VET course:

First of all, I am very interested in cookery. Second, I want to set up my own business of commercial cookery. Before I graduated from the university, to open a coffee shop or restaurant was my dream... Then, if I get a chance, I want to open a restaurant or a coffee shop. It doesn't have to be big. I really enjoyed so when I came here, the course is very good and everything is what I want.
(Chinese, Cookery, TAFE, NSW)

I found if I combine Korean cuisine with the Western cuisine it will rock in this country and anywhere in the world. Because many Koreans have come here and they are doing their restaurants, and it's all just plain Korean and many of the places are not good. My goal is actually to raise that standard by combining these stuffs. Actually, there is a chef from Belgium who is actually doing it. So maybe I can learn from him.
(Korean, Cookery, TAFE, NSW)

Birrell *et al.* (2009) asserted that international students were willing to pay for cookery courses because this provided them with a pathway to migration. Subsequently, Birrell and Perry (2009) further argued that, as international students can potentially earn little if they return to work in developing countries with a VET cooking

credential, their investment in Australian education must be solely to secure permanent residency. Clearly, while this may be the case for numerous international students, the above quotes from interviewees reveal that a group of international students are prepared to pay for their courses because they are not only genuinely interested in the trade but also wish to run their own commercial cookery business. For a number of the interviewees who prioritised the accumulation of skills, a VET course is valued because it provides qualifications they can take to their home country:

Before I studied at RMIT, I specialised in Business and then I studied that one year. And the purpose I moved to hospitality because, you know, when I come into Australia I started work in the hospitality industry. And truly, I fell in love. I love to deal with customer. And also like because, you know, in Vietnam tourism and hospitality is growing up very fast. And in the next ten years we enjoy different thing. That's why, that's the purpose I want to take this course to get the knowledge about hospitality, management or the skill how to become a good manager.
(Vietnamese, Hospitality, private college, Victoria)

This industry in my country is not very developed. So that's the main purpose of my study here in Australia. I don't really have intentions of staying here. So yeah, basically that's it.
(Mexican, Horticulture, TAFE, NSW)

I want to work there and make the system much better because our government is spending billions of dollars for the betterment of the people. But still we do have malaria cases existing in our country. There are hundreds of these small diseases which are still existing in my country. So, like, government is spending on the top billions of dollars but here it is not reaching at the bottom level to the people who really require that... So I want to become a part of this system... So that's why I wanted to have some formal education so I came here. I joined the community welfare course. So right now I'm pursuing it. And as soon as I finish that, then I may go back to country and join that health system in our country.
(Indian, Community welfare, TAFE, NSW)

These students enrolled in an Australian VET course because they wish to gain skills and qualifications that would enable them to contribute to both their personal success at home and the development of their country. They commonly identified problems that needed to be tackled in their homeland and suggested that, by returning with their new skills, they would be able to help ease these problems. Others referred to emerging industries at home and the consequent growing demand for workers with an international education and qualifications. In brief, these students have pursued their VET course with a particular employment outcome and a particular vision for their future that assumes they will be returning to their homeland.

VET as a pathway to higher education

A group of interviewees reported they were undertaking a VET course with the expectation this would provide a pathway to university:

It is because I am very interested in game design. This course in this TAFE can be connected to another university, called UTS. The game design course in UTS only accepts people who finish from this course. (Chinese, TAFE, NSW)

Well, first, I wanted to be bilingual in English... I have to be bilingual and maybe this course will help me to get into a university. If I can hopefully get a bit of money before and I can maybe enrol for one year or two years in a university. So I think that is a good way to stay, to get a diploma and to have access then later to uni. And if not, I can still go back home and have a diploma, I can start to find a job as well. So yeah, and I like the fact that it's not as hard as uni, it's a bit more relaxed.
(French, Communication and media, TAFE, NSW)

For many students, a VET credential is significantly less valued in their home country than a university degree. Therefore, their parents commonly expect them to obtain a higher education qualification or they themselves wish to do so. Student interviewees provided a number of reasons why they used VET as a pathway to higher

education. For the majority of this group, VET is their preferred choice because they can not afford the fees that universities charge and they hope their VET qualifications will enable them to gain a job that will generate the income they need to work their way through university. Others could not meet the IELTS (International English Language Testing System) requirement for university entrance and viewed the VET course as a means to improve their English and/or earn university entrance by completing a course that is taught in English.

Conclusion

Numerous articles in the media and publications by some academics have constructed the image of international VET students as 'PR hunters', which is a term that risks having serious negative impact on their learning. At the same time international students' interest in the acquisition of skills, their dream for professional advancement and their aspiration for self-transformation have been largely ignored in recent media as well as scholarly discussions of international VET students. The popularisation of these students as 'PR hunters' who have little or no interest in receiving a high quality education has also imposed and/or self-imposed serious costs on the sector itself. Without the protectionism provided by the migration-education link, the sector will find it difficult to market courses that have been devalued and stereotyped as low quality. In the context created by the 2010 amendments to the migration regulations, the sector will need to build an image that is based on an ability to provide a high quality learning experience and consciously address destructive ways of conceptualising international students.

As excerpts from the interviews with VET international students provided in this paper have revealed, these students are vibrant and mobile people who act on their dreams for the future and are motivated by multiple, differing and shifting aims. Their imagining

about who they are in the future and about potential future opportunities has motivated them to invest in VET courses and perhaps to be prepared to negotiate the complexities arising from studying in an unfamiliar environment and in a language that is not their native tongue. Consequently, the VET sector has a responsibility to ensure that it rebuilds its image and more fully develops its capacity to assist these students to realise their full potential in productive and fulfilling ways, to be engaged in an effective learning environment and to realise their dreams. That is, VET programs will need to become less migration-dependent and focus more on relevance to international students from different countries and capacity to accommodate the diverse study purposes of students. A broader VET program that is able to respond to a wide range of international students' instrumental and intrinsic motives will enable the VET sector to play a more sustainable role in global education exports. An emphasis on the adaptation of the content of the VET program, teaching strategies and pedagogical practices that can facilitate international students' engagement in learning and ensure high quality outcomes is needed.

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