

The Post-Pandemic Paradox Between Global Higher Education Marketization and Education Quality: A Case Study of the UK and Australia

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Abstract. In recent years, the impact of education marketization on higher education has been widely concerned and discussed. In the field of international education, the negative effects of marketization are increasing. This study breaks through the traditional argument that "excessive marketization weakens the quality of education", and analyzes the actual performance of higher education in Britain and Australia in the post epidemic era, against the background of Education Marketization from a multi-agent perspective. Specifically, this study adopts a three-tiered framework of "institution-organization-individual" to analyze how the UK and Australia have transformed international students from "educational subjects" into "financial instruments". The study finds that relationships among the state (government), universities, and students are marked by imbalances in rights, gaps in responsibility, and a breakdown of reciprocity. The conclusion is that the international education crisis in the post-pandemic era is essentially a crisis of the global higher education development model. Therefore, this study proposes to establish a sustainable international education ecology with the core principles of "ethical care" and "mutually beneficial development". It also hopes that this research can provide a reference for relevant policies and practices.

Keywords: Higher Education Marketization, International Education, Education Quality, Post-pandemic Era

1. Introduction

According to the data of UNESCO, the number of international students continued to increase before the pandemic, but there were significant fluctuations affected by the pandemic. In recent years, the growth of international students has also shown an obvious imbalance and uncertainty [1]. Against this backdrop, traditional higher education powerhouses such as the UK and Australia have long relied on international student tuition revenue, and their finances have begun to show serious structural vulnerabilities [2]. In the post-pandemic period, higher education has faced overlapping pressures, including global economic slowdown, geopolitical tensions, and reduced public funding. These pressures have intensified the long-standing tension between pursuing market returns and maintaining educational quality [3]. In public discussions, the terms "Watered-down master's

degree" and "degree factory" are often used. These labels reflect how society understands this contradiction.

Many studies use economic or management perspectives and frame the issue as a trade-off between market expansion and quality assurance [4]. However, such analyses often avoid the ethical and political aspects of the issue. International education is not just an industry or trade service, but a field involving multiple subjects, value judgments, and power relations [5]. This study examines the post-pandemic tension between marketization and educational quality in UK and Australian higher education. It analyses its underlying causes and discusses the challenges it poses for international education systems.

2. Analytical framework: the institution-organization-individual three-tier model

Existing research has explored the issues of international student mobility and the norms of international education from different perspectives. Macro research focuses on the shaping effect of national policies, global inequality, and marketization of higher education on mobility structures [6]. Furthermore, the constant growth in the number of international students in the post-pandemic era is still influenced by institutional factors [7]. On the other hand, at the meso-level, there have been discussions on how universities can balance economic benefits with educational responsibilities, as well as the organizational differences brought about by different national institutional frameworks [8]. Meanwhile, micro-level research focuses on the impact of institutional events (such as pandemics and visa policies) on students' learning experience, skills development, and social integration [9].

In this series of studies, Yang proposed four core ethical concepts for international student mobility: "rights and responsibilities", "reciprocity and hospitality ", "justice and equality", and "desire and recognition" [5]. This provides an important theoretical supplement for understanding the normative issues of international education. Although these analytical concepts take the ethical relationship as the starting point, as shown in Table 1, they can exactly correspond to different subjects.

Table 1. Subject correspondence

Institution	Organization	Individual
Rights	Hospitality	Desire
Justice	Reciprocity	Recognition
Equality	Responsible Practice	/

Therefore, based on Yang's concept of ethics, this paper further constructs an "institution-organization-individual" analytical model that connects the macro, meso, and micro levels, starting from the perspective of subject relationship. This model aims to systematically analyze the core concerns, action logic, and interaction mechanisms of governments, universities, and international students in international education. Thus, it reveals the tension between academic quality, fairness, and student experience in international education against the backdrop of marketization.

2.1. Macro-institutional level

Key actors in international education (such as the UK government and the Australian Department of Education) and "global governance or regulatory organizations" are deeply influenced by both neoliberalism and postcolonialism when developing macro-level education systems.

Neoliberal policies have profoundly shaped the landscape of higher education in both countries. For example, since the 2012 tuition fee reforms, the UK has significantly reduced public funding and marketized universities, making them increasingly reliant on high tuition fees from international students. Australia, on the other hand, identified higher education as an export industry earlier and made it one of the pillars of the national economy through policies [10]. This policy shift essentially shifts part of the financial responsibility for higher education that should be borne by the state to individual international students, triggering profound questions about "justice and equality" in education worldwide [11].

At the same time, the lingering influence of postcolonialism also plays a role. It has a global symbol and level of perception of the "superiority of Western degrees", which constantly inspires the "desire" of students around the world for Western qualifications [12].

Thus, neoliberal policies provided market channels, while postcolonial ideology continued to control demand, and the two conspired to build an international education market that appeared free but was actually characterized by unequal power relations [13].

2.2. Meso-organizational level

At the meso-level, the focus is primarily on "education providers" (i. e., schools). Faced with the dual realities of national education policies and the global student recruitment market, universities often find their strategies wavering and are forced to make ethical compromises.

Under the pressure of macro-institutional reforms, universities are increasingly adopting a "corporatization" survival strategy [14]. This manifests in the vigorous expansion of high-profit taught master's programs, the optimization of international ranking indicators (especially QS rankings), and the implementation of precise educational brand marketing. As a result of the above actions, the allocation of educational resources tends to shift from core academic activities such as teaching and research to market promotion and administrative management systems [15].

Clearly, universities are caught in an ethical dilemma. On the one hand, they need international students as a "cash cow" to maintain financial stability; on the other hand, as educational institutions, they bear the responsibility of ensuring teaching quality and fulfilling their educational mission. This dilemma often forces universities to compromise. Yang, in his analysis of Indian medical students, called this dynamic "compromise and tacit agreement" [16]. It describes an unwritten agreement: lowering admission standards in exchange for students graduating smoothly and maintaining financial stability.

2.3. Micro-individual level

At the micro level, the core actors are "international students," and their interaction with the "receiving country" transforms the "international student's" identity as a "knowledge seeker" into that of a "consumer. "

Under the guidance of the marketization of education, students are positioned as "consumers," which distorts their fundamental motivation for seeking knowledge. Students' learning behavior has been distorted from their own desire for knowledge and critical learning exploration into a transaction of degree diplomas as "credentials" or "cultural capital" [17]. Students' subjectivity is alienated into economic payment ability and consumption object, and their diverse backgrounds, experiences, and "desire" for excellent Western higher education have not been fully recognized in the education process [5]. In addition, there is often a lack of in-depth and reciprocal cultural exchange between the host country and the students. The interaction is often superficial or limited to

economic transactions, which not only deepens the social divide but also deviates from the original intention of international education to promote global cultural understanding [18].

3. Case analysis: problems and diagnoses in the UK and Australia

3.1. Britain: "compromise and tacit understanding" under over-commercialization

At the institutional level, the UK government has set a fixed cap on tuition fees for domestic students' undergraduate and postgraduate studies since 2012 (which was raised to approximately £9,250 per year in 2017) [19]. This policy appears to be a public regulation of higher education prices, but only local tuition fees are capped, while there is no similar cap on international student tuition fees. As a result, universities are increasingly relying on high international tuition revenue to make up for budget shortfalls and keep operating. In addition, the introduction of attractive post-study work visas (PSW) for international students clearly places universities and international students at the center of marketization. This has led to the shirking of national educational responsibility, with financial risks being shifted to international students and universities.

At the organizational level, in response to financial pressures, many universities have launched standardized, rapidly replicable taught master's programs on a large scale. Teaching tends to be in large classes, individual tutoring time is reduced, and the teacher-student ratio is deteriorating. Reports from the UK Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) have repeatedly pointed out that the growth of teaching resources in some institutions cannot keep up with the expansion of the number of students [4]. This embodies the logic of "compromise and tacit understanding": students pay high tuition fees in exchange for a degree; universities, to maintain student enrollment and revenue, may make silent "compromises" on academic standards. The two sides thus form a "tacit understanding" aimed at reducing the risks of the "transaction."

At the individual level, this "transactional" nature leads to the alienation of students' desire for education into the pursuit of the symbol of a degree. Their rights as learners, such as high-quality teaching and in-depth academic interaction, have been undermined. At the same time, this instrumental relationship also hinders the establishment of genuine "reciprocal hospitality" with the host country, with many international students mentioning feeling isolated or merely treated as economic contributors [2].

3.2. Australia: savvy marketism under a regulated framework

Institutionally, the Australian government has adopted a "regulatory marketization" approach that differs from that of the United Kingdom. It has built a strict regulatory framework for education quality through the Education Services for Overseas Students Act (ESOS) and the Higher Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA), striving to achieve a balance between industry expansion and quality assurance. However, in practice, this regulation is often internalized by universities as a kind of "Savvy Marketism" [20].

Australian higher education institutions, which play an organizational role, enhance the market appeal and academic brand value of their education through curriculum innovation (such as the integration of the IB curriculum) and "human-centered" instructional design [10]. Dollinger and Vanderlelie's research shows that such college initiatives are discussed within a "market-oriented" framework, student participation is regarded as a market feedback mechanism, and the results of curriculum innovation are mainly measured by competitiveness and market fit. This shows that their seemingly student-centered approach often serves the logic of market competition first [10]. At the

same time, Australian universities are increasingly reliant on tuition fees from international students. A 2023 report by the New South Wales Auditor General showed that tuition fees from international students from China, India, and Nepal accounted for 40.5% of the total tuition fees of universities in New South Wales. International tuition fees were comparable to the amount of tuition fees from local students, and these three countries accounted for 71.7% of the total international tuition fees [21]. These circumstances collectively illustrate that the underlying motivation for universities to promote curriculum innovation and student experience design is often aimed at enhancing global market competitiveness and economic benefits, rather than being entirely based on educational mission.

At the individual level, Australia paid early attention to the "rights" of international students. However, some studies have pointed out that under the framework of "consumer is God", students tend to put more emphasis on their rights as payers and relatively ignore their responsibilities in the learning process, such as academic investment, academic integrity, and cross-cultural interaction [18]. This imbalance between rights and responsibilities is detrimental to the formation of a healthy and mutually beneficial academic atmosphere and social relationships. Consequently, "hospitality" remains merely a one-sided provision of services, failing to foster two-way exchange and progress.

4. Recommendations: toward a new future for international education

The analysis in this paper shows that the root cause of the predicament of higher education in the UK and Australia in the post-pandemic era lies in the fundamental ethical and policy problems of the international education development model with marketization as its core. Moreover, the cases of the UK and Australia have important warning effects. If the path of pure marketization continues, it will inevitably lead to a continuous decline in the quality of education, further causing the loss of social trust and exacerbating global educational inequality. The economic and geopolitical uncertainties in the post-pandemic era have also accelerated the exposure of this systemic risk [3].

Therefore, to correct the current loss of values in international education and to give full play to its role in promoting global cultural understanding and knowledge sharing, this article proposes the following suggestions.

4.1. Suggestions for policymakers

For policymakers, when planning and designing international education strategies, it should go beyond the one-sided perspective that international education is only regarded as an "export industry". At the same time, it should maintain its global public goods attribute, integrate the principles of equity and equality, and ensure the openness and inclusiveness of education to all groups.

Introduce more binding and transparent legislation in a highly market-oriented International Education Environment. For example, the policy can require colleges and universities to use a certain proportion of the tuition income of international students to improve the teaching quality through legislation (setting up academic support posts, reducing the teacher-student ratio, improving classroom facilities, etc.). At the same time, the policy should promote the establishment of a transparent quality accountability system in Colleges and universities, ensure the quality of education, and improve the degree of Education Trust.

When shaping international education policy, policymakers should take a long-term view of global student mobility and recognise the need for cross-border cooperation. Policy should not focus only on economic returns. It should also strengthen education's global outlook.

In addition, policies should ensure that international students are treated fairly academically, culturally, and socially. Policy measures can include projects to support students' integration into local culture and activities to promote cross-cultural exchanges. In this way, international students can not only contribute economic value, but also actively participate in campus community and cultural life.

4.2. Suggestions for higher education institutions

Universities and colleges are the primary providers of international education and, therefore, must shoulder social responsibility. The education system should be reformed to move away from commodification, and the core values of education should return to knowledge transmission and humanistic care.

Higher education institutions should redefine their core mission. Education should not only provide qualified workers for the labor market, but also cultivate citizens with a global perspective, promote cultural diversity, and assume social responsibility. Achieving this shift requires reforms to internal governance and adjustments in the allocation of educational resources, reducing excessive reliance on rankings and income.

Universities should also control class sizes to ensure the quality of basic interactions between teachers and students. Good interaction not only helps improve teaching effectiveness but also supports students in better integrating into the campus and academic environment. For international students, a lack of interaction is likely to deepen cultural barriers and affect their learning participation, performance, and psychological adaptation.

Moreover, universities should create an inclusive campus environment through both policy and culture. This includes offering academic support and establishing structured mechanisms for cross-cultural interaction that promote a culture of mutual hospitality. The aim is to recognize international students as equal members of the academic community, not merely as consumers of education.

5. Conclusion

This study found that the contradiction between marketization and education quality in UK and Australian Higher Education in the post-pandemic actually reflected an ethical crisis and the sustainability of the traditional international education model. Under these superficial contradictions, there are the loss of international education value orientation and a systematic imbalance of ethical principles. Solving these issues calls for deep value reconstruction and institutional reform, not fragmented policy fixes.

This study does not cover the study of students, educational agencies, or other major areas of international student mobility. Future research can pay more attention to the exploration of student groups, especially the real experience and anxiety of students in the highly market-oriented education system. Furthermore, the impact of educational agencies deserves further study. These studies could provide a deeper understanding of the multiple dimensions of contradictions in international education and suggest targeted interventions. Additionally, the research can be extended to more educational destinations (such as Asian countries) to explore the differences in different political, economic, and cultural backgrounds.

This study ultimately highlights that the future of global higher education depends on upholding ethical principles in the face of market competition and financial pressures, while collectively building a sustainable educational ecosystem. This is a challenge facing not only the UK and Australia, but also a common issue for higher education worldwide.

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