

An Evaluation of a Pathway Program: The Students' View

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INTRODUCTION

The context of this paper is a Doctoral study that explored the influences that led to the deregulation of international student recruitment ('the policy') in Australia. Through a critique of policy process, that is, contexts of influence, production and practice (Ball 1990 – 1998) the policy cycle was tracked from influence to implementation, with a particular focus on pathway programs as one aspect of policy practice. The study examined the question: who were the key players or individuals who contributed to the 'policy's' creation, the ideologies which influenced these individuals and the contexts within which decisions were made?

The export of education to international students is an established hallmark of the Australian higher education sector, and as such there are many facets of implementation that could have been scrutinised. In focusing on the development of pathway programs offered through private providers it was possible to explore 'the policy' cycle from macro to a microanalysis (Vidovich 2002), and explore an area that to a great extent remains uncharted. The research concluded that through *global, national and local (glonacal)* influences (Marginson & Rhoades 2002), the recruitment of international students to Australian universities developed an industry that is uniquely Australian. The development of pathway programs by the private sector in association with universities is quintessentially Australian, and one of the distinguishing characteristics of that industry.

Study pathways are a unique feature of the Australian education system, with many international students following study pathways rather than limiting their study to a particular sector or level of the education system. (DEST, 2006)

SETTING THE CONTEXT

The successful development of pathway programs has been made possible through the national accrediting system of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF). Private providers develop courses mainly designed for international fee-paying students within this framework, and upon successful completion, the pathway courses provide both international and local students direct articulation to higher education. In most cases the provider offers a Certificate IV (an alternative to the end of high school exams, such as Tertiary Entrance Exams, 'A' levels and the International Baccalaureate) in a number of popular streams, for example, Commerce, Media and Communication, Information Technology and Design. The Certificate leads to a Diploma which is the equivalent of the first year of a university course. In many cases the private provider has an agreement to use a university's intellectual property, for which the university is paid a royalty. In turn the university agrees to moderate assignments and exams, and grants advanced standing of one year for the Diploma. It is this specific model that was the subject of this research and the focus of this paper.

The establishment of pathway programs and colleges for the export of education flourished in Australia, and since 1996 the model has become more refined. As a result there are many universities in Australia that have formed relationships with public (the Technical and Further

Education – TAFE colleges) and private providers to develop pathway courses. Although these full fee-paying pathway courses are accessible to local students, the primary focus of these providers is the recruitment of international fee-paying students.

Through their collaborative partnerships public universities and private colleges have established a strong profile for pre-university pathways with the promise of articulation to a university place upon successful completion. The objective of these university/private provider partnerships is to capture international students early in their education life cycle and ‘lock in’ a student’s tertiary destination prior to their meeting university entrance requirements. From the perspective of the universities, these strategic alliances are essential to maintain recruitment numbers. To this end, many Australian universities have established close financial and academic relationships with providers. The sole objective of these relationships is to recruit substantial numbers of students via these pathways, and in doing so, diversify the revenue base for the public university. In Australia these relationships have been largely driven by the dramatic decrease in Commonwealth funding for higher education over a sustained period of time, and the need for universities to increase their fee-paying international student numbers.

FOCUS OF THIS PAPER

The specific research on the pathway students’ perspective as key stakeholders provided an opportunity for a deeper understanding of the *local* responses that shape policy in practice. The micro level scrutiny (Vidovich 2000) of the policy process exposed how the end user, the student, impacts on the evolution of pathway programs. The decisions students make; the evaluation of their experiences; and their views on the quality of the programs become an integral part of the policy cycle.

The data gathering from students for this study occurred in 2003 and 2004. The cohorts represented those international students currently in pathway programs and those who had graduated to mainstream university courses. To assess the views of key stakeholders in pathway programs and the quality of those programs students were asked to complete a questionnaire, which assessed different aspects of their programs. For example, why they chose to enroll in the pathway colleges and whether their expectations were met. The questionnaire content for both groups of students was essentially the same, with a slight difference in the mainstream instrument, which gave students an opportunity to reflect retrospectively on their pathway college experience.

For mainstream students two Australian universities were chosen, designated as universities A and B. To ensure anonymity, the students who had already articulated to mainstream courses were sent emails, by the respective university administrations, inviting them to complete a questionnaire on-line. It was difficult to determine accurate numbers of the potential cohort as this depended on the universities’ data bases, which had only recently been programmed to track pathway students and were not completely reliable at that time. Estimates based on anecdotal information and informal tracking suggest that the number of students from the pathway colleges in mainstream at that time, were about 900 for University A and about 850 for University B. However, in total, University A sent emails to 293 students with about 60 failed messages returning, and University B sent out 350 notices to students with about 60 returning as failed messages. These failed messages were obviously due to students not updating the universities’ databases with current email addresses. In total, this exercise produced 149 student responses, 50 from University A and 99 from University B, although not all students responded to all questions.

In addition, questionnaires were administered to 165 students who were currently studying in the colleges, 77 from a pathway college at University A and 88 from a pathway college at University B. Questionnaires were also administered to a total of 84 students enrolled in pathway colleges at Universities C and D in the United Kingdom (UK). All current college students participating in the research were chosen according to availability at the time, and the majority came from Diploma classes. This decision was made for two reasons. Firstly, to ensure that students' English levels were sufficiently proficient to fully comprehend the content of the questionnaire, and secondly, because generally Diploma students had been at the colleges for a longer time. All students participating were invited to take part, but also given an opportunity to decline. When they agreed to take part they signed a consent form, which was collected and kept separately from the questionnaires.

Analysis of the questionnaires was carried out according to whether students were previous pathway students in mainstream or current pathway respondents, rather than separate analysis for each college. This decision was made after initial analysis, which revealed there was no significant difference in responses between the colleges in Australia. The SPSS program was used to generate frequency distributions and descriptive statistics for all mainstream and pathway respondents and for the Australian and UK respondents separately. This analysis was conducted for all variables including the multiple response questions relating to problems students may have experienced. Cross tabulation analyses were also performed to compare the Australian responses to those from the UK on the categorical variables.

STUDENT PROFILES

The first five questions focused on background data providing a profile of each student. The majority of students involved in the research were aged between 18 and 23 years, and the following table provides a profile of the students' country of origin, and linguistic and academic backgrounds.

Table 1 Summary of Student Profiles (Top Four)

Profile	Aust. Pathway Students N=165 %	UK Pathway Students N=84 %	Aust. Mainstream Students N=146 %
Country of Origin	Other – 21 Hong Kong - 19 Indonesia - 16 Malaysia – 15	China – 50 Hong Kong - 30 Other - 12 Myanmar & India - 2	Indonesia - 21 Malaysia - 15 Hong Kong - 14 Singapore - 10
1st Language	English – 27 Cantonese - 20 Mandarin - 17 Indonesian - 16	Cantonese - 37 Mandarin - 36 Other - 23 English - 2	English - 39 Indonesian - 22 Cantonese - 18 Mandarin - 13
Academic Entry Qualification	Other - 47 GCE 'O' levels - 15 HKKCE - 11 Senior Middle – 7	Other - 33 Senior Middle 3 - 32 HKKCE - 13 GCE 'O' levels - 13	GCE 'O' levels - 27 GCE 'A' levels - 24 SMU 3 - 24 HKKCE - 11
English Entry Qualification	Other - 34 IELTS - 31 GCE 'O' level - 16 SPM English – 11	IELTS - 59 TOEFL - 13 Other - 12 SPM - 8	IELTS - 40 GCE 'O' level - 32 TOEFL - 17 SPM - 11

Table 1 indicates that the 'other' category rates highly in the country of origin category (21%) for current pathway students. Examples of countries listed for this category were Seychelles, Brunei, Japan, Thailand, Korea and Sri Lanka. The data also show that 27% of students listed 'English' as their first language. This can be explained in that some Singapore and Malaysian students have been educated in an English-speaking high school system. The above analysis reveals that one of the most significant differences between the Australian colleges and those of the UK at the time of the research is that the latter were heavily dependent on Chinese students from China and Hong Kong (80%), whereas colleges in Australia had a more varied population.

The academic entry qualifications reflect the standard high school certificates of the key countries, for example GCE 'O' and 'A' levels for Malaysia and Singapore, Sekolah Menengah Umum (SMU) for Indonesia, Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCE) for Hong Kong, and Senior Middle for China. However, the range of qualifications listed in the 'other' category also accounts for diversity in the available pool of students for these courses and the range of courses available to international students to access Australian higher education. For example, qualifications included various Australian Foundation courses offered offshore and onshore, either by universities or private providers; tertiary entrance exams from a range of states, some offered offshore; and Certificate IV, offered through private colleges or Technical and Further Education (TAFE) colleges, both onshore and offshore. This range also accounts for the 34% cited in the 'other' category for English qualifications as most of the above courses carry with them an English proficiency level.

STUDENT EXPECTATIONS AND EXPERIENCE

It is ultimately the student experience that completes the policy cycle process as it provides a student perspective and therefore a better understanding of the implications of 'practice' in a *local* setting. With this objective in mind, in the second section of the questionnaire students were asked to deliberate on their experience in the colleges and questions focused on:

- Factors that influenced their choice of college;
- Expectations they held, both academic and social;
- Whether these expectations had been met;
- How they evaluated their experience.

The first question in this category asked students to reflect on the influences that affected their choice to enrol in a particular college. Students were provided with a scale that ranged from 'not an influence at all', 'a little influence', 'some influence', and a 'big influence'. The percentages in Table 2 have been grouped to show responses that indicated 'some influence' and 'a big influence' on student choice, and the Australian pathway students' responses have been put in order from biggest to least influence. Numbers in parenthesis for the other two groups indicate their order of influence.

Table 2 Influences Affecting Choice of College

Influences	Aust. Pathway Students N=165 %	UK Pathway Students N=84 %	Aust. Mainstream Students N=146 %
Offered best pathway courses	66	80 *(1)	84 *(1)
Destination	62	71 *(3)	62 8(4)
Reputation of the partner university	59	74 *(2)	69 *(3)
Agent Recommendation	44	70 *(4)	52 *(5)
Trimester System	42	71 *(3)	70 *(2)
Reputation of the College	39	52 *(5)	31 *(6)
Couldn't get anything else I liked	30	43 *(7)	31 *(6)
Friend's Recommendation	25	45 *(6)	27 *(7)

*Denotes order of influence with 1 = biggest

The data shows that for the pathway students in Australia the top three influencing factors for choosing the college were the 'offer of courses', 'destination' and 'reputation of the partner university'. The 'offer of courses' was also the biggest influence for pathway students in the UK and pathway students in mainstream, followed by 'the reputation of the partner university' for the former group and 'the trimester system' for the latter. From a marketing perspective it is interesting to note that the 'agent's recommendation' rated either fourth or fifth for the three groups, which indicates that agents do have a substantial role to play in the choice of study destination. The flexibility and speed with which a course can be completed, that is, the 'trimester system' rated fifth for pathway students in Australia, but registered as more of an influence, third and second for the UK and mainstream group respectively. 'Not being able to get anything else' was evidently not a significant influence and was included as an option as often the perception is that students choose a pathway program as a last resort. A 'recommendation from a friend', quite interestingly did not rate highly for any of the groups.

It is evident from the figures above that the overwhelming factor influencing choice of pathway programs is the belief that these courses offer the best articulation to a university. Comments accompanying this question revealed that most students had either failed to make the university academic cut off scores, or they viewed this pathway as an efficient alternative. This was expressed by one student as:

"...this college offered me the opportunity to study and become prepared for university studies, as well as providing direct entry into second year of my chosen degree at ..."

In addition the reputation of the partner university rated higher than the reputation of the college, as stated by another student.

"My family knew the University's reputation and did not feel that we needed to look elsewhere."

This view was reinforced in another question asking directly why the college was chosen. For this question students were given three reasons why they chose the college, because of its reputation, because of the reputation of the partner university or because of the reputation of both college and university. Table 3 illustrates that the majority of students in two groups chose the college because the partner university had a good reputation, that is, 55% for current pathway students in Australia, and 66% for current students in the UK.

Table 3 Why was the pathway college chosen?
(Response to: 'Why did you choose the college?')

Why did you choose this college?	Aust. Pathway students N=165 %	UK Pathway students N=84 %
The college has a good reputation	13	6
The University has a good reputation	55	66
Both the college and the university have a good reputation	32	29

In the UK where this particular concept of pathway courses was relatively new, the private provider depended more on the reputation of its partner universities. In any event the choice of university is an essential ingredient for success in this model and the maintenance of a symbiotic relationship between provider and university is essential. The university depends on the provider's marketing expertise and resources for its student pipeline, and the provider depends on their reputation, and consequently a close marketing alliance in promoting the colleges.

The next set of questions asked students to reflect on their expectations of the college. A list of objectives was listed and students were asked whether they were important. The range offered was from 'extremely, very and of some importance' and finally 'not important at all'. Table 4 summarises the findings for each group and the percentage quoted combines results for 'extremely and very important'. Numbers in parenthesis for the other two groups indicate their order of importance.

Table 4 Student Expectations of the Colleges

Expectations	Aust. Pathway Students N=165 %	UK Pathway Students N=84 %	Aust. Mainstream Students N=146 %
Preparation for university studies	88	89 *(1)	86 *(2)
Obtain a place at university	88	78 *(2)	93 *(1)
Improve Study Skills	77	74 *(4)	76 *(3)
Access to university facilities	64	69 *(5)	73 *(4)
Improve their English	59	77 *(3)	53 *(5)
Meet & socialise with new people	53	46 *(7)	55 *(6)
To meet local students	30	55 *(6)	32 *(7)

*Denotes order of importance 1=most important

It is to be expected that for the majority of students, 'obtaining a university place' is a high priority, rating this either first or second. What is more interesting is that students also have high expectations of the colleges in 'preparing them for university studies' rating it either first or second, and 'study skills' being rated third or fourth. The UK students gave 'improving English' a higher rating compared to the Australian groups. This higher rating is explained by the more difficult language obstacles faced by Mandarin and Cantonese-speaking students that made up the bulk of the student population in the UK colleges at the time.

From the above data it is also evident that, students rate 'access to university facilities' quite highly at either fourth or fifth. This rating indicates that it is a great attraction for students that the colleges are on university campuses offering them the lifestyle that entails. The social aspects of university life did not rate highly, either sixth or seventh, and it is evident that meeting new people including local students is not seen as a priority, that is, for pathway students. This view was slightly different once students were in mainstream, as is illustrated below by some students who took the opportunity to make comments about this aspect of their pathway college experience.

In an attempt to enrich the above data, mainstream students who had completed their studies at the colleges, were asked to reflect, with a forced response of 'yes' or 'no', whether the expectations listed in the above table had been met. In addition, these data were analysed further to reveal whether 'first language other than English' was a significant factor in expectations not being met. Table 5 summarises this response indicating the number of students who answered each part of the question.

Table 5 Have expectations been met?
(Response to: 'Please indicate whether this expectation has been met.')

Expectations of Mainstream Students N=149 %	Importance of Expectation %	Expectations Met %		
		Yes	No	Percentage of 'No' cases whose first language was not English
To obtain a place at university	93 N=133	97 N=85	3	100
Preparation for university studies	86 N=133	71 N=85	29	68
Improve study skills	76 N=137	73 N=84	27	61
Access to university facilities	73 N=132	80 N=83	20	82 $X^2(1) = 5.761, p < 0.05$
Meet and socialise with new people	55 N=131	87 N=85	13	91 $X^2(1) = 5.726, p < 0.05$
Improve their English	53 N=135	60 N=79	40	63
To meet Australian students	32 N=127	53 N=80	47	74 $X^2(1) = 5.647, p < 0.05$

'Obtaining a university place' rated highly for these mainstream students who had achieved their goals. The rating for expectations met with 'preparation for university studies' and improving

'study skills' was also a positive outcome, with 71% and 73% of students stating that their expectations had been met. At first glance the figure of only 60% of mainstream students confirming their English had improved at the college is disappointing. However, in considering this statistic, it is also important to note that 39% of mainstream students listed English as their first language.

However, it is interesting to note the data on whether first language was a significant factor in meeting expectations. A chi square analysis revealed that the relationship between students whose first language was not English and expectations not being met was significant in three areas. Students who were less confident with English were less likely to use university facilities, socialise with new people and meet Australian students on the campus. When given the opportunity to make comments on the questionnaires, a small group of students expressed disappointment regarding this aspect.

Students were asked: 'In what ways could the college have prepared you better for the university experience?' Of the total mainstream cohort, 42% (62 students) took the opportunity to respond to this question and about 5% (3 students) made comments related to wanting more social events and or meeting more local students:

"Getting more local students and have more school events to meet new people."

"More social activities organised and sports because I felt quite isolated."

"It would be better if promoted the Guild and joining clubs so that the students get to meet other students and also for people whose first language is not English it would give them an opportunity to improve their English".

It is interesting to note that whilst students were in the pathway colleges they did not rate the priority of meeting local students highly, however once in mainstream, students recognised this as a worthwhile outcome.

Other comments worthy of note with regard to better preparation related to the transition from the college to university, with a focus on the academic aspects of the university experience. Of the 42% (62 students) who responded to this question 35% (22 students) chose to comment on how well or otherwise they had been prepared for course content, lecturing styles and assessment. These comments were equally divided where students took the opportunity to endorse the transition experience or criticise it for not being effective. The latter groups believed their pathway college experience was too much like high school and that not enough had been done to expose them to university lecturing styles, the difficulty of second year units and the expectations of university life.

The student experience was further explored in the questionnaire by asking what the most common problems were that students had encountered in the pathway colleges. A list of problems was provided and students were invited to indicate whether they had experienced any of them. They were also asked to add problems if they had not been listed. The figures below indicate the percentage of students from each group who encountered the following problems. For pathway students in Australia the list ranges from problems encountered by most students to the least. For pathway students in the UK and those in mainstream the numbers in parenthesis indicate the order from most encountered to least encountered.

Table 6 Most common problems encountered by pathway students

Problems	Australian Pathway Students N=165 %	UK Pathway Students N=84 %	Australian Mainstream Students N=146 %
Studying enough	56	21 *(9)	54 *(2)
Organising time	52	22 *(8)	56 *(1)
Improving English	41	57 *(1)	37 *(5)
Understanding what is expected	39	30 *(6)	49 *(3)
Living away from home	36	36 *(5)	45 *(4)
Understanding the language in units	35	39 *(4)	29 *(7)
Understanding lecturers	34	51 *(2)	37 *(5)
Getting assignments in on time	32	21 *(9)	37 *(5)
Making new friends	29	42 *(3)	31 *(6)
Studying in a large university	19	29 *(7)	24 *(8)

*Denotes most encountered to least 1=most encountered

It is evident from the above data that the UK students are having a diverse experience compared to those students in Australia. Both mainstream and current students in Australia were more preoccupied with personal objectives, for example, 'studying enough' and 'organising time' with over half listing these as problems, whereas these difficulties as well as 'getting assignments in on time' rated ninth and eighth for the predominantly Chinese group. Although once again the data indicates that for these students, language problems were more prominent. 'Improving English' was rated as the most encountered problem with 57%, and 'understanding lectures' was rated second with 51% of students encountering this problem. All students had a common experience related to 'living away from home' rating this either fourth or fifth.

Mainstream students rated 'getting assignments in on time' and 'understanding lecturers' as fifth and sixth, and these results could be influenced by their then current university experience. 'Making new friends' was obviously more of an issue for the UK pathway students compared to their Australian counterparts, and studying in a large university was not an issue for any of the three groups, rating this as the least encountered problem as seventh or last.

ASSESSING THE QUALITY OF THE EXPERIENCE

Overall the purpose of the above questions was to give students an opportunity to reflect on their time in the pathway colleges. The next set of questions focused on the quality of that experience and how they evaluated it. In an attempt to report on an overall impression, a series of questions were asked of the three different groups. Firstly, current students in Australia and the UK were asked whether they 'would recommend the college to other students' with a forced response of 'yes' or 'no'.

Table 7 Recommendation of the college to other students

Response	Aust. Pathway Students N=165 %	UK Pathway Students N=84 %
Yes	89	91
No	11	9

Table 7 indicated that 90% of pathway students both in Australia and the United Kingdom would recommend the college to other students. In addition all students in Australia were asked to rate the quality of education they had experienced to date at the college, on a scale ranging from 'very bad, bad, fair, good, very good and excellent'. The following table summarises the results cited by students from 'fair to excellent', showing that about 80% rated the quality of education received between the range of 'good', 'very good' or 'excellent'.

Table 8 Quality of education received at the college

Response	Aust. Pathway Students N=165 %	Aust. Mainstream Students N=146 %
Fair	17	14
Good	42	39
Very Good & Excellent	38	43

Students in the UK colleges were also asked to comment on whether they were happy with their teachers and the courses they were undertaking, with a forced response of 'yes' or 'no'. Of the total cohort 96% registered a 'yes' answer to being happy with the teachers, and 89% were happy with their courses.

As mainstream students had completed their pathway studies they were asked to reflect on the academic quality of this experience. Firstly they were asked, 'how well did they feel the college prepared them for studies within the university environment'? They had an option to indicate on a scale 1-4 'not well at all' at 1, 'just ok', 'well', and 'very well' at 4. They were also asked whether they felt better or less prepared than other students, with the assumption that they were mixing with students who had similar experiences. Tables 9 and 10 summarise these findings:

Table 9 Preparation for the University environment

Response	Aust. Mainstream Students N=146 %
Not well at all	4
Just OK	39
Well	39
Very Well	18

Table 10 Better or less prepared than other students

Response	Aust. Mainstream Students N=146 %
Much better prepared	15
Better prepared	48
Less prepared	13
Don't know	24

Overall about 58% of students rated their preparation either 'well' or 'very well', and about 63% believed they were better prepared than their peers who had attended other pathway programs.

In assessing the student experience the data shows that overall the students have made a positive evaluation. The main objective of students in the research was to gain a place in the university of their choice through a pathway college, and in that aspect about 90% of students agreed that this had been met. From the data on student expectations, however, there is also evidence to indicate that the expectation of students is that the college will not only find them a place within a university but also add value through the development of certain necessary skills, that is, in the: development of study skills; improvement of English; and preparation for university studies. The data indicates that overall the colleges have met student expectations quite well in all these aspects.

The evaluation that students gave on the quality of education they received was also positive. About 90% of current students in Australia and the UK believed they would recommend the college to other students. Both mainstream and current Australian students rated the quality of education highly, 82% and 80% respectively on a scale from good to excellent. Over 50% of mainstream students believed that had been prepared 'well' or 'very well' and 'better' than their peers. However, considering the 'value adding' students are seeking from pathway colleges, there would be the expectation that the figures Table 9 on 'preparation for the university environment' would have been better (57% rating 'well' and 'very well'). Comments offered by the students in this section of the questionnaires highlight the difficulty international students face in adapting to the expectations of a western tertiary environment and all that entails.

In summary the data indicated that the student experience in the pathway colleges is a positive one, both in Australia and the United Kingdom. Students have clear objectives in choosing this type of course, which includes, not only the access to a place in the university, but also to develop the necessary skills to do well in their mainstream courses. The data also indicate that the majority of students believe their expectations have been met. It was evident that the majority of students chose the college on the basis of the partner university's reputation, and as such a co-operative relationship and a shared vision between the partner and the university is axiomatic.

STUDENT TRACKING

Tracking whether students' long term objectives were being fulfilled was central to the analysis of the policy cycle in addressing whether evolution and implementation of 'policy' was successful or otherwise. On a micro level tracking the performance of pathway students once in mainstream courses provides an answer to this question. University B had in place a database system which could identify some of its pathway students and subsequent performance in mainstream courses. Successful student performance beyond the pathway program was a core benchmark for the University to monitor and evaluate the relationship between university and provider.

Diploma pathway students gain access to second year of the degree and so the performance of these students was compared with non pathway international students. Table 11 compares the semester-weighted average of pathway students in semester one of second year with international students in mainstream in the same semester and year who gained direct access or access through pathways other than the one that was researched in this study. It would have been useful to compare this pathway cohort with students who had entered via other similar pathways, but that data was not available at the time of the research. Courses that had an enrolment of 10 or more students have been included.

Table 11 Comparison of pathway students in mainstream and international mainstream students -2nd year, semester one 2004 results.

Course Name	Ex Pathway Students		Non Pathway Students	
	Student Count	Average of SWA	Student Count	Average of SWA
Bachelor of Commerce	228	56.69	216	57.91
Bachelor of Arts	27	54.50	57	63.42
Bachelor Arts (Design)	22	53.39	48	63.51
Bachelor of Arts (Mass Communication)	15	61.06	18	60.49
Bachelor of Science (Computer Sc.)	10	47.42	11	54.77
	302	54.61	350	60.02

The most significant results above are those of students in the Bachelor of Commerce as the numbers being compared are over 200. The tracking for this course indicates that the semester-weighted average for pathway students is slightly below the non-pathway cohort, but not significantly so.

Since 2004 University B has refined the tracking of its pathway students and currently reports on the pass and retention rates of these students compared to non-pathway international students and domestic students. Tables 12 and 13 provide a summary of this tracking for the Bachelor of Commerce (largest cohort) for 2005 and 2006.

Table 12 Pathway student pass rates compared to international and domestic students – second year of Bachelor of Commerce

Ex Pathway Students			Non Pathway International Students			Domestic Students		
Passed	Number. assessed	% Pass	Passed	Number. assessed	% Pass	Passed	Number. assessed	% Pass
(S2,05) 141.3	180.3	78.4	280.0	354.0	79.1	340.0	410.8	82.8
(S1,06) 99.6	71.1	71.0	323.5	247.6	77.0	461.9	378.5	82.0

Table 13 Pathway student retention rates compared to international and domestic students – second year of Bachelor of Commerce

Ex Pathway Students			Non Pathway International Students			Domestic Students		
Head Count S1, 05	Head Count S1, 06	Retention Rate	Head Count S1, 05	Head Count S1, 06	Retention Rate	Head Count S1, 05	Head Count S1, 06	Retention Rate
252	242	96.0	694	550	79.3	1014	864	85.2
Head Count S2, 05	Head Count S2, 06	Retention Rate	Head Count S2, 05	Head Count S2, 06	Retention Rate	Head Count S2, 05	Head Count S2, 06	Retention Rate
383	373	97.4	725	695	95.9	1012	924	91.3

The above results on performance of pathway students once enrolled in mainstream courses illustrate quite clearly the success of these pathway programs. Both the tracking results and those of student responses provide a positive rationale for this specific aspect of the implementation of 'the policy', its continuation, and the flourishing of such models in the provision of international education in the Australian higher education sector.

CONCLUSION

The research on student experience and academic tracking of a specific delivery model provided a micro level perspective on an aspect of the international student recruitment policy cycle, and one that is important to explore. The justification for this analysis exists in the explanation and meaning it provides to the evolution of the policy process, that is, from influence to practice. The deregulation of international student recruitment is a policy, which finds its genesis in global neo-liberal economic and social ideology resulting in reduced government spending on higher education. The development of pathway programs within universities is a direct 'local' response to that ideology. The student experience of pathway programs and the evaluation of that experience provide one perspective on the impact and consequences of 'the policy' in practice.

When considering the value that pathway programs have contributed to the development of international student recruitment, the research in this area is by no means commensurate with the volume and significance of these courses to the higher education sector. Pathway programs have in the context of international student recruitment developed considerably, but are still in many ways regarded on the margins of the industry. The lack of specific definition and classification offered by the Australian Education International sector of the Department of Education, Science and Training statistics and trends are an indication of this marginal position. "To datevery little has been known about the nature of these pathways and the number of international students undertaking them" (DEST, 2006).

This study assesses one aspect of pathway programs in an effort to address the lack of qualitative and quantitative data on the sector. There is, however, much more research to be done on pathway programs and the tracking of pathway students whilst in mainstream and until they complete their degrees. Teaching in pathway programs does not enjoy the same status of tertiary teaching, and yet for many international students these programs provide the foundations of future academic success in that sector. Further research is required on a number of levels. Firstly, more in depth analysis is required of the curriculum content of pathway courses, the various teaching methodologies, and the value adding that is provided by them. Longitudinal studies within the universities that accept these students are also required. Finally, and of equal importance, is the requirement for an analysis on actual numbers of international students recruited in pathway programs related specifically to the various sectors that make up the Australian Qualification Framework, that is both public and private and their various inter-sector linkages. This type of scrutiny will provide an accurate assessment of both the academic and economic value of what is one of the most important and characteristic features of Australia's delivery of education to international students.

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