The international student safety debate: moving beyond denial

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In 2009 international student safety became an issue of immediate concern to Australian international education exporters following a series of demonstrations by Indian students and interventions by concerned foreign governments. With these developments the ‘industry’ became fixated on how best to secure Australia’s share of the international education market in a context in which it was impossible to deny international student safety is a systemic problem. This paper contextualizes this development by utilizing a stigma management framework to review the unfolding debate on international students and safety in the USA, the UK, New Zealand and Australia. We argue that in all four cases it took an exogenous shock to convince education exporters to acknowledge student safety as an issue that needs to be openly debated. We also suggest that Australian officials were slow to make this acknowledgement because they mistakenly believed the industry was shielded by its link to the immigration program.

Keywords: international students; student experience

Introduction

A reputation for being able to provide a safe study environment is a valuable asset in the international education market. Nevertheless, international student safety has traditionally not been a topic of public debate because education suppliers have feared open discussion might undermine their market position. This situation is now in transition with industry leaders and regulators in increasing numbers conceding international student safety is a problem that needs be addressed. In this paper we explain the new openness. A multi-country focus is embraced in order to show that the transition is widespread and to clarify why its onset was delayed in Australia. We begin with a brief discussion of ‘stigma management’ and then proceed to examine the US situation, where debate is characterized by the need to assure US citizens that international students are not a threat to their security while concomitantly assuring students that the USA is a safe study destination. Next, we examine the situation in New Zealand, the UK and Australia, respectively. We argue that in all the four countries examined, education exporters began publicly debating international student safety only when subjected to a shock that compelled them to address the possibility their locale might be perceived as unsafe. We note that Australia was the last of the four countries to acknowledge safety as a systemic problem and suggest this may have been because education suppliers, marketers and regulators mistakenly believed

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Australia’s immigration program would ensure a constant inflow of students. Finally, we advise that education suppliers and regulators in all nations need to develop and lock-in practices and policies that will assure potential and existing international students and their governments that student safety is a topic that will be prioritized and openly debated.

**Stigma management and reform**

Fear of being stigmatised as an unsafe study destination helps explain why the international education sector and its regulators embraced a debate on international student safety only when their reputation was put at serious risk. A stigma is a deeply discrediting attribute that can attach to an individual, organization or nation. Stigmatization can occur when potential customers perceive and take note of a discrediting condition, consider the condition to be threatening or unpleasant and deem the associated organization or nation to be at least partly responsible for the condition. Education institutions and countries that are exporters of education are wise to avoid being stigmatised as being unable to provide a safe study environment and/or being identified as a locale that has a high crime rate because stigmas of this nature can impose significant costs on education suppliers and limit their capacity to sustain an inflow of high quality students. Seeking to avoid these impositions, education suppliers, marketers and regulators have embraced what Goffman (1963) termed ‘stigma management strategies’. These are stratagems for shaping audience impressions in ways that enable stigmatization to be avoided or overcome. In the hierarchy of stigma strategies, concealment entails the hiding of a discrediting attribute, denial aims to persuade targeted audiences that negative evaluations are unwarranted and assurance seeks to convince targeted audiences that an acknowledged problem is being dealt with effectively. This last strategy aims to build or regain trust and confidence by convincing relevant audiences the discrediting attribute is being responded to in a manner that will induce its elimination. When responding to a shock that threatens to stigmatise an organisation, industry or locale, actors holding an established position as a core belief will be inclined to utilise high profile tactics that they hope will enable them to remove the stigma without having to abandon their convictions. In other words, if it is feasible, institutions threatened with stigmatisation are prone to embrace an assurance strategy that involves little more than ‘spin’ that is designed to assure the concerned audience that their fears have been effectively addressed. If this response removes the threat of stigmatisation, adherence to core beliefs will tend to induce a reversion to the position embraced prior to the shock. Given the frequent manifestations of this tendency, advocates of significant change need to lock in place, through the use of education and new regulatory structures, any reforms they are able to gain during the crisis period.

**The USA**

Within the USA, the safety of higher education students has been a topic of much academic and popular debate because of the ‘Jeanne Clery Disclosure of Campus Security Policy and Campus Crime Statistics Act’. This legislation compels all colleges and universities to disclose information about crime on or within the remit of their campuses. This is an important instrument for managing safety reputation because crime tends to be an issue that parents, students and legislators associate with safety. Compliance with the Clery Act is monitored by the federal Department of Education,
which can impose penalties and suspend transgressors from participating in student financial aid programs. The Act was introduced because education institutions are prone to understate the level of crime associated with their organization and because it was hoped safety awareness would be raised and potential enrollees would incorporate campus safety into their calculations when deciding where to study. Researchers have subsequently shown the Act as having a positive impact on the awareness and behavior of students and education institutions and that students and parents do use the publicised data when choosing where to study (Carter, 2002). These positive outcomes have been realised even though the impact of the legislation has been constrained by education suppliers’ distaste for openness, many of whom provide only the level of resources required to avoid prosecution (Aliabadi, 2007; Carter, 2002; McNeal, 2007, p. 110).

The influence of the Clery Act on the choices and practices of international students has not been examined in detail. Nevertheless, the association between international education and safety has been much debated because of what Skinner (2007) terms the ‘foreign student regulatory dilemma’ (p. 1). This quandary stems from the fact that following the 2001 Twin Towers attack many Americans became convinced international students should be excluded from the USA because they allegedly threaten the safety of US citizens. At the same time, many other Americans want to sustain the inflow because they recognize international students make a major contribution to the nation’s economic and strategic competitiveness. Given these contending perspectives, US governments and the education sector have had to embrace a stigma management strategy that can assure concerned Americans that international students are not a threat, because the freedoms of these students are effectively monitored and restrained, while concomitantly assuring international students that this monitoring regime does not constitute a threat to their safety (Bernstein, 2003; Johnson, 2004; Urias & Yeakey, 2009).

As part of the effort to assure international students they will be safe if they study in the USA, researchers and officials have striven to convey the impression that the monitoring process is becoming less onerous and that the common perception that the USA is a crime-ridden society is unjustified. Promotion of the latter part of this message predates the terrorist attack on America’s World Trade Center in New York on September 11, 2001. Indeed, as early as 1984 Sundeen revealed that international students’ fear of street crime is diminished by the experience of daily life in the USA. Sundeen (1984) also revealed that ‘participation in cultural groups and activities is associated positively with feelings of fear, i.e. the greater the participation, the greater the feeling of being very unsafe’ (p. 11). From this finding, he deduced that while participation in social events strengthens social ties amongst international students, it provides an avenue for inflating the significance of information relating to crime. This finding was subsequently supported by Coston (2004, p. 189) who found students ‘who had heard about the victimization experiences of other foreign students … tended to be more worried about becoming the victim of a crime’. Coston also determined that international students tend to believe the risk of becoming a crime victim is no greater in the USA than in their home countries and that most believe they have effective means to protect themselves, though a majority admit this includes the carrying of weapons.

Despite the assurance implicit in the US research, it has proven difficult to convince prospective international students that the USA is a safe study destination. Indeed, students considering overseas study view the USA as no safer than China (Bush, Brett, & Archer, 2008). Nevertheless, combating the safety stigma is not
impossible for US officials because those charged with marketing education internationally can rightly argue that the incidence of crime in the USA has declined markedly. Moreover, they can correctly argue that many of the crimes that tend to beset international students are more prevalent in competitor nations such as Britain and Australia (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2004; Madsen, 2006). Efforts to assure international students that they will be safe if they study in the USA have no doubt also been aided by efforts to soften the international student monitoring process that was begun under President Bush and is being continued by Barack Obama.

The ability of US officials to advance evidence that can assure international students they are not likely to become crime victims if they study in the USA is a capacity not available to their counterparts in other nations. This is because the required research has not been undertaken outside the USA. Indeed, discussion of international student safety has been consciously avoided by education suppliers in countries where international education is perceived to be primarily a source of income and deviation from this position only occurred when education exporters and their marketing agencies were shocked into embracing more ethical strategies.

New Zealand

New Zealand (NZ) was the first of the profit-oriented education exporters to experience a shock sufficient to compel its education industry to question the wisdom of adhering to an avoidance or denial strategy when addressing international student safety. The shock befell the sector in 2003 when China’s embassy advised the NZ government that it was dissatisfied with the pastoral care being accorded international students (Li, 2008). China’s concerns centred on student physical safety, the licence allowed fraudulent suppliers, racial vilification of international students and the number of Chinese students who were victims or perpetrators of crime. Unappreciative of the importance of this warning, NZ’s government responded by trumpeting the nation’s ineffective Code of practice for the pastoral care of international students (Sawir et al., 2009) and by insisting there was no systemic safety problem in New Zealand. Avoidance and denial, however, were shown to be disastrous responses when China’s Ministry of Education reacted in turn by publicly branding New Zealand a nation that does not provide adequately for the safety of Chinese students. This development had a devastating impact on the NZ education export sector and induced a flowering of debate that aimed to identify the risks besetting international students and how to restore NZ’s reputation as a safe study destination (Butcher & McGrath, 2004; Jackson, 2005; Li, 2008; Tan & Simpson, 2008). The literature thus generated was multifaceted and unique in that it acknowledged international students can be perpetrators as well as victims of crime. Li (2008), for example, revealed that a small but significant minority of Chinese students had embraced the opportunity provided by being far from home to engage in extortion, fraud and illegal forms of drug dealing, gambling and prostitution.

New Zealanders also reacted to the Chinese intervention by developing new policies and practices; this effort being taken in hand by Deputy-Prime Minister Cullen, who used his position to resist opposition from those education exporters who were disinclined to publicly acknowledge that international student safety is a problem for their institutions (Nicholas, 2005, p. 5). Armed with the authority of his Ministerial position, Cullen forged an assurance-centered stigma management program that included active collaboration with ISANA – the representative body for professionals
in Australia and New Zealand who work in international student services, advocacy, teaching and policy development in international education and the creation of a National Safety Advisory Group with representation from the police, immigration, vice chancellors and insurance firms. Charged with evaluating the ‘effectiveness of information for international students [and] potential safety initiatives for international students’ (Cullen, 2006, n.p.) and empowered by the Deputy Prime Minister, this body was initially able to generate a flow of valuable advice to the government (McGrath, 2008, personal communication).

But while the China shock enabled Cullen to advance the development of a stigma assurance strategy that was more than spin, his capacity to sustain this effort diminished as the immediacy of the China shock faded and the industry’s core belief that avoidance and denial are the most effective stigma management strategies resurfaced. With this development advocates of open debate and the allocation of increased resources for student safety were confronted with increasing resistance from industry leaders. A measure of this resistance is the fact that, by 2008, universities were calling on the National Safety Advisory Group to replace the term ‘safety’ in their name with the words ‘student experience’.

That China’s intervention and a determined minister were insufficient to overwhelm the industry’s preference for denial and avoidance indicates the strength of the resistance education exporters can manifest if called upon to both openly acknowledge they have student safety problems and must commit significant resources to these problems. Cullen was able to achieve some successes because he could point to the market power of foreign governments that are willing to act as a collective voice for international students. Nevertheless, he was not able to lock in fundamental changes and, hence, five years later his attempt to bolster the Code of practice for pastoral care had still not realised any improvements of significance. Some of the consequences of this failure were highlighted by Joris de Bres (2008), the NZ Race Relations Commissioner, in an address to the 2008 New Zealand ISANA conference. De Bres dedicated his presentation to a Korean international student who had been beheaded by neo-nazis. In offering his condolences to the family the Commissioner observed that ISANA members have a ‘particular responsibility to ensure the safety of your students, to make them aware of the risks and to provide them with easily accessible processes to report instances of racial harassment’ and advised that the Race Relations Commission was eager to gather from practitioners what they believed constituted good safety practice (de Bres, 2008, p. 2). But, in making this plea Des Bres observed that New Zealand had a long way to travel, for the Commission had found that:

- there is some reluctance by tertiary institutions to recognise that there is a problem in their own area, although it may be a problem elsewhere;
- there are few specific processes for international students experiencing racial harassment off campus and little specific information on student safety for international students;
- the most common processes are generic ones for all students relating to harassment and bullying within the institution;
- little information is available on the incidence of racial harassment of international students on or off campus and little research is conducted within educational institutions on the subject; and
- there is a reluctance to share information on complaints about racial harassment.

(p. 2)
The Commissioner concluded his address by pleading with education institutions to move beyond avoidance and denial and to openly acknowledge the existence of safety problems on their campuses, accept they have a moral responsibility to clarify and make public which ‘students experience racial harassment on or off campus’ and cooperate in combating these outrages (pp. 2–3).

The UK

The British international education industry avoided discussion of international student safety prior to China’s intervention in New Zealand in 2003. However, the sector was compelled to abandon this tactic when, in 2005, the Prime Minister shocked the industry by launching his Second initiative on international education (PMI2). The first initiative dated from 1999 and was primarily a capacity building and marketing exercise. However, with PMI2 Tony Blair insisted it was not enough to grow the education export business it was also necessary to ensure the sector remained sustainable. What prompted Blair to take this new path remains contentious but, given that the China market had been the driver of PMI1 and a senior staff member who helped draft PMI2 was a New Zealander with direct experience of China’s 2003 intervention, it is reasonable to assume the NZ experience would not have been lost on the British Government. The PMI2 involves a five-year proactive strategy designed to build and sustain the UK’s position as a leader in international education. At its core is the reassuring message that the UK can provide both a world-class education and a safe and rewarding study experience (CUBO, 2008; Merrick, 2007). Much of the literature generated by this effort shows signs of a continuing struggle within the UK between those who favour an avoidance/denial approach to stigma management and those who have embraced an assurance strategy. Thus British Council (BC) literature continues to manifest elements of a denial strategy even while its 2006 publication, Safety first: A personal safety guide for international students, emphasises the risk to safety posed by crime and discusses student relations with police, property insurance, accommodation, racial discrimination and safety when at home, on the streets or in public transport or taxis. Throughout the document it is apparent the British Council is aware international students tend to equate safety with the risk of becoming victims of crime. This was also manifest in a 2007 British Council document, Creating confidence, which details the results of a research program BC funded to clarify key aspects of international student safety. The report documents students’ views on safety lectures and publications, housing and district safety, the proportion of international students who become crime victims and steps students might take to ensure they remain safe from crime.

The assurance strategy being developed by the BC involves a significant dose of spin, but is more than spin. The BC has worked with other British institutions to develop effective programs that can improve the safety of international students not least by bringing together safety practitioners and theorists to debate what constitutes best practice. In October 2008, for example, BC staff contributed to a conference, entitled ‘Ensuring Student Safety and Security’, that aimed to raise safety awareness on campuses and disseminate the message that Britain is making a serious effort to ensure students who study in the UK are safe. Driving home this message, Britain’s Government has created neighborhood policing teams with responsibility for campuses. Initially trialled at Cardiff University, where the strategy reduced student-related crime by 60%, this effort was extended to all of Britain on 1 October, 2008.
Australia

Within Australia no serious effort was made to move beyond avoidance and denial until 2009. Prior to this time, the only concession made was a 2007 minor amendment to the Education Services for Overseas Students (ESOS) Act and various exercises in spin. This was despite Australian Education International (AEI) (2007) reporting only 75% of international students are satisfied with the provisions made for their safety. The prevalent attitude was exemplified in 2007 when a lecturer felt compelled to complain to the Australian Crime Commission (ICC) that the international students he had been teaching were being defrauded by a rogue provider. Investigation of such activities is not normally part of the ICC’s brief. On this occasion it took up the issue because the teacher had reported the alleged fraud to the relevant regulator and not received a satisfactory response and because the ICC had met a similar reaction when it reported education suppliers who were using the student visa system to staff the sex industry (McKenzie, 2007).

But while education suppliers and government continued avoiding and/or denying the existence of a systemic international student safety problem, their capacity to sustain this strategy became untenable in the face of the growing body of criticism. Initially the critics were academics, journalists and police officers who were motivated by concern for student safety and by a conviction that a refusal to publicly debate student safety was morally unacceptable and a threat to the sustainability of a major export industry (Das, 2008a, 2008b; Forbes-Mewett & Nyland, 2008; Vembu, 2009). By early 2008 the exposures and warnings emanating from these quarters were becoming a regular occurrence. However, their commentary elicited little response from education suppliers and regulators. This situation began to change only when the critics were joined by more influential actors. In August 2008 the first such intervention occurred when China’s consular staff called for ‘better protection for students after receiving reports of a high number of robberies and assaults’ (Levett, 2008, p. 8). To the embarrassment of state and university officials this call was issued at a seminar held in the New South Wales Parliament, which was attended by 150 Chinese students who were advised that safety was not a serious problem in Sydney. At this point the industry’s effort to deny there was a safety problem was undermined when a representative from China’s consulate advised that he had surveyed 100 Chinese students and found ‘more than one in four had been a victim of crime, 20 had been burgled at home and six had been robbed, several at knife point’. The official then proceeded to advise that China’s government wanted Australia to take immediate steps to rectify this unsatisfactory situation. After a six-week period, China’s diplomats expanded on their initial intervention with the ambassador, Zhang Junsai, observing in a public lecture that his government was unhappy with the pastoral care being provided to the 112,000 Chinese students studying in Australia. This time the issues raised were exploitation in the housing market and students’ need to gain work experience; the ambassador insisting that in both cases Chinese students ‘deserve better’ (Armitage, 2008).

Australian industry officials and regulators found it difficult to reply effectively to the criticisms of the Chinese Ambassador given their failure to collect relevant data meant they could not even explain most of the deaths that have occurred to international students studying in Australia. Confronted with this problem, Brisbane City and the Victorian Government created investigative bodies tasked with examining the concerns of international students. The Victorian ‘Task Force’, for example, was instructed to ‘review the overseas student experience in Victoria to see what more can
be done to improve the experience’ (Victorian Government, 2008). Both bodies subsequently issued recommendations but there was no apparent follow-up and, as a consequence, cynicism was fueled that these efforts were no more than spin. Likewise, the Commonwealth responded by instructing AEI to hold a workshop in Shanghai at which AEI officials reportedly responded to Chinese attempts to conduct a frank debate on international student safety with the claim that there is no safety problem in Australia.

Observers who questioned the wisdom of the avoidance and denial strategies were dismissed as occurred with the CEO of AEI when at the end of 2008 she called on the industry to embrace a ‘Third Phase of International Education’ that would place new emphasis on sustainability and student welfare (Buffington, 2008). By the time of this rebuttal, however, a second shock was besetting the industry. Through the 1990s, Australia’s immigration and education programs were entwined in ways designed to both generate a supply of skilled labour and increase education exports. As a consequence, international students who graduated from Australian institutions could gain permanent residency with an ease not available in any other major education exporting country (Tremblay, 2005). This opportunity was well known to international students (Bush, Brett & Archer, 2008) and was taken-up with enthusiasm. Indeed, AEI (2008, n.p.) reports that in ‘2007, 78% of international respondents either had applied for (30%) or planned to apply (48%) for permanent resident status in Australia’. With this prop in place Australian university managers could with justification reason that even if Australia’s reputation as a safe study environment was diminished by internal and external critics the lure of permanent residency would ensure the international student inflow would be sustained. Moreover, if necessary the inflow could be increased because in a context of high growth the education-migration link can be tweaked when necessary.

The assumption that the skilled immigration program would prop up student inflow was brought into sudden question on the 9th October, 2008, when the Prime Minister ‘raised the possibility of slashing Australia’s record high intake of migrants should the global financial crisis plunge the economy into a sustained downturn’ (Maley & Edwards, 2008, p. 1). In issuing this declaration the Prime Minister was responding to mounting calls for a curtailment of immigration given the increase in unemployment that was expected to be generated by the financial crisis. The relevance of this observation dawned rapidly on Australian university managers and they quickly called on the government to guarantee the skilled immigration program would remain undisturbed (Bebbington, 2008). This protectionist appeal elicited little sympathy from a government that was convinced it was confronting the greatest economic crisis since the 1930s and needed to be perceived by the electorate as actively striving to protect Australian jobs. Accordingly, the skilled migration program was cut significantly and with this development it became clear that the promise of permanent residency was of much less substance than has been marketed by the Australian education industry and government.

Given Australia’s reputation as a locale offering a package that includes both a qualification and permanent residency has been diminished, the relative importance of its reputation as a safe study destination has been greatly increased. In this context the importance of the following type of calamity is likely to have a much greater impact on the education industry than it has in the past. The tragedy occurred on the same day that the AEI was attempting to spin their Chinese counterparts at the conference in Shanghai. On that day an intruder forced his way into the apartment of four interna-
tional students in Sydney and raped all four of these young people at knifepoint. In the process a girl of eighteen died and a boy of nineteen suffered permanent spinal injuries when in desperation the two fell naked from a balcony as they sought to flee their tormentor. Within twenty-four hours the savagery inflicted on these four innocents had been reported around the world and Australian industry leaders were hanging their heads in despair at the impact these events might have on Australia’s reputation in the market place. Following this terrible event a downloadable orientation and pre-arrival handbook was funded by the Commonwealth Government and prepared by ISANA for international students. This useful document became available on the NEAS website and can be customized to suit the priorities of individual institutions. Titled the Rainbow guide, the document is described as ‘an excellent resource to help providers disseminate essential safety information to students. Almost one-third is dedicated to safety issues, including emergency contacts, laws & safety in Australia, home security, personal safety, public transport safety, home, fire safety & beach safety’ (NEAS/ISANA, 2008). This positive step, however, was too little and too late to save the Australian international education industry from crisis for by this time the parents of international students and the students themselves had come to appreciate their safety would not be paid due attention by Australia’s Government or education suppliers unless they took matters into their own hands.

The first important manifestation of this newfound expression of agency occurred when the mother of the girl who was raped and died came to Sydney for her daughter’s funeral. To the embarrassment of the education sector and its regulators, while in Australia her lawyer announced the family intended to establish a fund to instruct newly arrived international students about how to remain safe while in their chosen study destination. The mother announced that this was being done because she was convinced Australian authorities accorded inadequate attention to student safety and she wanted ‘all overseas students and the public to know that safety issues for overseas students is very, very important’ (cited in Robinson, 2008, p. 3). In the face of this devastating comment, education exporters remained adamant there was no systemic safety problem in Australia. Their ability to maintain this position, however, was rent asunder in 2009 as it became apparent China’s Government was becoming critical of Australian policies in a range of areas and Indian students finally took their safety into their own hands. The students did so by: occupying major city intersections (thus ensuring that knowledge of their distress was widely reported in India); organizing to protect Indian commuters; and calling on the Indian government to demand that Australia acknowledge there is a systemic international student safety problem and to embrace policies and practices that can successfully address this problem. Explaining to the authors of this paper why they had resorted to direct action, Gautam Gupta, the official media spokesman for the Federation of Indian Students of Australia, suggested that ultimately it was a question of respect. The students had raised their concerns with the government discreetly and been told there was no systemic problem and this message had been echoed as one Indian student after another fell victim and despite the fact that the police were aware a disproportionate number of Indians had been victims of robbery-related crime. In other words, when Australian representatives continued to insist there was no systemic safety problem, in the face of continued attacks on Indians, this was perceived as a sign that Australian officials believed Australia’s reputation in the market place was more important than the safety of Indian students and that the students did not have the intelligence to see that this was the case.
Australian government and industry officials were rocked by the students’ reaction to their denials and the more so when both the Indian and Chinese Governments responded in the manner demanded by the students. Appalled by these developments, officials at all levels went into damage control, insisting they had always believed international student safety was an issue of paramount importance and would make even greater efforts to ensure these students were kept safe. The New South Wales Government led this effort by condemning attacks on students and establishing another Task Force to investigate international student concerns. The Commonwealth Government went further and created a taskforce to address attacks on students and another to ‘develop strategies to support the wellbeing of overseas students’ (Gillard, 2009). When announcing the formation of the latter body, Minister Gillard also announced the Government would establish a hotline on which students could raise concerns and would issue a third edition of its Guide to studying and living in Australia. That a new edition of this text was required, given the new circumstances, is made manifest by the fact that the second edition uses word safety only once with the associated message being that Australia is a safe country though of course students would be wise to take some basic precautions. One assumes the new edition will expand on this aspect of the document.

The reforms announced by Minister Gillard were cosmetic but her statement was nevertheless of importance because she also announced the Government would fast-track a review of the ESOS Act to tighten its regulatory provisions. She also sent a high level delegation to India to assure the Indian press and community that the issue of student safety was being taken seriously and announced both the Deputy Prime Minister and the Prime Minister would follow up on the delegation by visiting India before the end of the year. Finally, one other concomitant development of importance was the issuance by Universities Australia (UA) of a ten-point Action plan for student safety (UA, 2009) that involved a clear abandonment of its 2008 claim that international student safety is not a ‘systemic problem’ in Australia. The plan was a product of a meeting of Australia’s Deputy Vice-Chancellors International and of a discussion document that drew heavily on an earlier version of this paper and emphasized the need for robust law enforcement and necessary complementary actions. In issuing the plan UA (2009) observed:

Universities believe that the situation requires a national response and close cooperation between all education providers and the Commonwealth government, state authorities, foreign governments and their diplomatic representatives and other partners, to find solutions which will enhance the total educational experience including ensuring the present and future safety of all students. (n.p.)

A week after the release of UA’s plan it was announced by the Australian Greens (2009) that they had convinced the Senate to hold a comprehensive inquiry into the:

roles and responsibilities of education providers, migration and education agents, state and federal governments, and relevant departments and embassies, in ensuring the quality and adequacy in information, advice, service delivery and support … identification of quality benchmarks and controls for service, advice and support for international students studying at an Australian education institution … and other related matters. (n.p.)

Significantly, the first item on the extended list of specific issues to be examined is student safety.
Conclusion

International student safety has become a topic of public debate because education suppliers, marketers and regulators in all four of the case countries examined in this paper have been compelled by foreign actors, the business sector and/or students to move beyond their preference for avoidance and denial. Australia was the last of the four countries to acknowledge publicly that international student safety is a systemic problem and in so doing belatedly begun the shift towards the implementation of an assurance strategy. We have suggested this delay may have been because the Australian industry and government mistakenly believed Australia’s immigration program would ensure that the inflow of international students would be sustained. It is disconcerting that Australian leaders failed to learn from the NZ experience as did their peers in the UK. Nevertheless, the initiation of an assurance strategy is very much welcomed. The bridgehead having been established, however, it is now imperative that this be consolidated and extended if the industry and its regulators are not to revert to denial and avoidance and limit the assurances they provide to spin. Indeed, the danger of reversion needs to be addressed with both urgency and vigor for if this does not happen it is highly likely the reply provided by Gautam Gupta when asked by the authors what he expected would be the outcome of the flowering of public interest in international student safety will prove all too prescient: ‘More employment will be generated for non-Indians to solve Indian problems. Then they will find some good Indians to parrot the Government line that there is no longer a problem. And then we will be back on the streets’.

Serious improvements in international student safety can be won if academic and media critics remain vocal in insisting that student safety must not be sacrificed to profitability; if significant competitors in the international education market strive to gain or preserve market share by highlighting their capacity to provide a safe study destination; if the home governments of international students continue pressuring host counties to ensure that safety is accorded a high priority by both education suppliers and regulators; and if international students continue to remain agents who actively seek to preserve their safety. Host governments and peak education bodies can help ensure there is not an unhelpful retreat by supporting policies and practices that go beyond spin and that actively seek to promote debate and practices that can overcome the fear of reputation damage that currently dominates the perspective of education suppliers and regulators. Possibilities that may help achieve these goals could include the enactment of an expanded version of the Clery Act that would provide easily accessible information that would inform prospective students and analysts of the safety record of individual education suppliers and regions. If this was done on a multinational basis, and the information supplied in a manner that enables effective comparison, it would greatly increase the capacity of students to make informed choices that relate to their safety. It would also compel education suppliers to accord greater attention to safety and increase their willingness to prioritise safety when allocating resources. Government and key representative bodies might also work toward the establishment of an international student ombudsmen’s office with powers to investigate and publicly report failures to provide for international student safety and which would be independent of and situated outside the education institutions and their marketing agencies. Finally, international student representatives and their home governments should be accorded a voice on relevant advisory boards to lock in the presence of agents who do not have a vested interest.
in denying that student safety can be put at risk by studying outside one’s home country.

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