Introduction

More than five million students studied in degree courses outside their home country in 2017, with a projected increase to eight million by 2025 (UNESCO, 2018). Host countries rely on these students for income, specifically to cross subsidize higher education, but also for the broader economic gains, and to a lesser extent, to facilitate internationalization of the curriculum. International student flows are increasingly multidimensional, with students travelling regionally for study as well as to traditional destinations in the West and Global North (Cheng, 2021), generating an increasingly competitive environment. While the Covid-19 pandemic has substantially impacted physical mobility, students have continued to engage in substantial numbers with temporarily distanced learning (ICEF Monitor, 2020). This has created substantial challenges for institutions which have met calls to reduce tuition fees in recognition of the curtailed nature of the pandemic student experience (The Independent, 2020; Yang et al., 2020). While these calls may not take full account of the resourcing required and challenges of delivering online learning, they do highlight tensions around tuition fees and the equity and ethics around international student recruitment. These dynamics shape the context where pre-sessional English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programmes catalyse the supply of international higher education and facilitate international student recruitment by bridging the linguistic shortfalls of degree programmes (Pearson, 2020). Pre-sessional programmes enable universities to recruit students who do not meet language entry requirements, thereby significantly expanding potential student numbers. EAP also encompasses in-sessional skills and language support, meaning the
provision of workshops, tutorials and resources for students currently studying. Often, this is provided by a centre, but some institutions embed EAP provision within academic departments.

In established host countries, the marketization and internationalization of higher education have become taken for granted. This chapter aims to explore and expose some of the tensions in relation to international student recruitment. Marketization creates ethical tensions for all those involved in international student recruitment, from students, to agents, to universities, to host countries. It generates economic incentives which would not exist (or would be highly attenuated) in a publicly oriented system. The aim of this chapter is to explore some of these tensions, not in the interest of ‘resolving’ them, but rather to expose the challenges.

We draw on several recent projects for data, and seek to synthesize these with previous policy analyses. In most of these projects, the focus has been on the UK, or on actors with intentions or connections to the UK, and this is reflected throughout the chapter. We have sought to draw parallels and make connections with other countries where possible to highlight the global relevance of these insights. This approach unfortunately continues to centre the UK and therefore fails to undermine the persistent intellectual coloniality inherent to the contemporary field of international student mobility. Instead, we take on Moosavi’s (2020a) challenge to ‘de-imperialize’, rather than seek to decolonize: in this case by destabilizing the imperialist assumptions that configure international higher education in the UK context.

Context

Marketization, distinct from marketing, signifies the process by which previously regarded as public goods become privately owned products (Findlay, McCollum and Packwood, 2017). In the higher education domain, as public support declines, tuition fees become an important source of supplementary income. Using market competition was considered as an effective policy incentive for greater innovation and adaptation as well as low cost delivery (Foskett, 2011). In such a marketized system, three main vectors are involved (Teixeira et al., 2004: 4–5): ‘promotion of competition between higher education providers, privatization of higher education either by emergence of a private higher education sector or by means of privatization of certain aspects of public institutions, as well as promotion of economic autonomy of their education institutions,
enhancing their responsiveness and articulation to supply and demand of factors and products. In the broader context of globalizing neoliberalism, the discourses of marketization have become dominant in higher education (HE) sectors worldwide. In market terms, customer satisfaction should be the measure of success; therefore student satisfaction has become the key indicator of higher education quality. Yet, scant evidence indicates the benefits of marketization of education apart from the short-term financial benefits for universities (Judson and Taylor, 2014). Specifically, educational outcomes in terms of long-term skills such as critical thinking and complex reasoning are not improving in the process of marketization (Arum and Roksa, 2011). In this regard, some scholars critique that marketization has transformed the nature of higher education from a public to a private good (Newman and Jahdi, 2009), alumni from lifelong learners into professionals, students from critical thinkers into consumers (Judson and Taylor, 2014: 52), and transformed the relationship between researchers and learners into the relationship between a service provider and a consumer (Hall, 2018). Marketization may be a dominant discourse and organizing principle, but it has many critics.

In recent years, the rise of the international higher education market has become significant (Maringe and Foskett, 2010), which is more diverse and dynamic than the home market and offers opportunities for countries to gain export income. Along with the trend of globalization (Varghese, 2013), promoting international higher education and recruiting full-paying international students as an alternative source of income are considered lucrative choices for many universities across the world (Lomer, 2017). In general, as discussed below, international students are charged higher tuition fees than domestic students (Tannock, 2013). As a result, more universities especially in the popular host countries such as the United States, the UK, Australia and Canada, cast their attention to developing markets abroad and seek to secure an advantageous position in competition for international students by employing various recruitment strategies (Foskett, 2011). In the UK, for example, the strategies range from national branding, to targeted recruitment practices depending on the specificity of the geographical markets, to multiple marketing approaches, to brand building of individual universities (Findley, McCollum and Packwood, 2017). Among those, contracting with education agents and agencies from emerging or key markets such as China and India is conceived of as a cost-effective and important way of undertaking international student recruitment (BUILA, 2021). In this sense, the marketization of international higher education is enhanced (Foskett, 2011).
Indeed, the marketization of international higher education has become widely accepted and received little public resistance. This may be tied to the challenges of imagining higher education as a ‘global public good’, when it has historically been closely linked to the project of nation building (Marginson, 2016). However, some critiques and concerns associated with this special quasi-market still arise. First, marketization of international higher education has shifted to the financial interest that the host countries can achieve, rather than cultivating global talents (Findley, McCollum and Packwood, 2017). Second, international students are over-represented by wealthy or elite groups from particular nationalities given much higher tuition fees charged to them (Bolsmann and Miller, 2008), deviating from the apparent/stated intention of bringing diversity to the campus and classes for its educational benefits. International students are often referred to as offering a ‘window on the world’ for home students (Lomer, Papatsiba and Naidoo, 2018). This over-representation results in negative stereotyping of international students in general by domestic students and by academic staff. This also implies the potential risk of overdependence on income generation from limited markets. Therefore, marketization of international higher education exacerbates issues of educational inequity (Tannock, 2013), as international higher education is predominantly exploited by wealthy, middle-class and elite families as a channel to get rid of the equity constraint of domestic education systems in their home country and reproduce positional advantages through studying abroad (Waters and Brooks, 2010). It also compromises the potential educational benefits of internationalization and globalization in relation to higher education.

On the grounds that international student recruitment has become a significant revenue source for universities, the discourse of international students as cash cows is prevalent. For example, the most recent UK International Education Strategy (DfIT and DfE, 2019) sets a target of recruiting 600,000 international students by 2030, in the context of the revenue education exports in general to the UK. They specifically justify this ambition by saying that ‘international students bring important revenue to the UK higher education sector and to the UK economy’ (11). This narrative has been identified on both the national scale in the UK (Lomer, Papatsiba and Naidoo, 2018; Tannock, 2018), Australia (Robertson, 2011) and the United States (Choudaha, 2017). On the institutional level, Cantwell’s (2019) research on international undergraduates’ tuition revenue among some US colleges and universities indicates that tuition revenues differ within and between those higher education institutions (HEIs) that can attract many international students and those that do not have the
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visibility to do so. Precisely, not every university in the United States that recruits international students will benefit, which is probably applicable to HEIs in other countries, as discussed further below. Moreover, Choudaha (2017) points that viewing international students as cash cows is unethical and detrimental to the reputation of universities. Yet the economic rationale remains dominant as a legitimation of international student recruitment.

The Economics

International students’ tuition fees are a key source of support for the UK higher education sector, and the economy more broadly (DfIT and DfE, 2019; Johnson et al, 2021). The practice of setting differential fee levels for home and overseas students is often taken as unproblematic, particularly in countries where universities are partially subsidized by taxpayers. Where students or their parents have not paid taxes in that country, these additional fees can be considered to reflect the unsubsidized cost (Walker, 2014). After long resistance, countries such as Norway, Finland and Germany (Altbach and de Wit, 2018) are moving towards introducing international student fees, making this a globalized norm (Kauko and Medvedeva, 2016). But it is worth remembering that not so long ago, subsidizing international student fees was considered to be an important political and cultural endeavour (Walker, 2014). Indeed, in the postcolonial period it was seen as a matter of responsibility for imperial powers to support the development of newly independent nations through international higher education, and the framing of international students as ‘ambassadors’ remains an important rationale (Chankseliani, 2018).

In this section, we draw on the preliminary analysis of data from the Reddin survey1 on tuition fees to illustrate and challenge the rationalities that underpin international student recruitment (Oliver, 2021).

In contrast to national policies set for home students, British policy has set no cap on international tuition fees (Walker, 2014). Our analysis of the Reddin survey data shows that international postgraduate tuition fees for classroom-based courses (PET) have increased from an average of £8,606 in 2006 to an average of £16,455 in 2020. This represents a nearly 200 per cent increase over this time. The highest fee charged at this level is £29,796 at the London School of Economics and Politics, while the lowest is £9,750 at the Royal Veterinary College. In 2020, international PGT students were charged on average 188 per cent more than home students, or £7,037.
Our analysis suggests that international tuition fee levels correspond negatively to institutional reliance on tuition fee income. The less an institution relies on tuition fees, the higher its international student fees are set. Typically, lower ranked institutions rely more on tuition fee income in the absence of other sources. International higher education can be understood as a status good (Marginson, 2013), valuable to the extent that it is positional – not everyone has it. Pricing international fees highly confers a symbolic value that suggests the degree or course at this university has scarcity value and connotes high quality. This is exemplified by the single highest fee charged in 2020 by the University of Oxford for its MBA: £54,590. In a sense, the MBA can be understood as the least essential degree, most similar to a luxury product (British Council, 2003).

This discussion of tuition fees illustrates several points. First, international tuition fees are increasing rapidly over time in marked contrast to home student fees. This generates an ethical tension, as follows. Second, international student fees are being charged in many cases nearly double the price that home students are paying for precisely the same experience and education. International students are not typically entitled to any additional services or support which might justify this fee differential. Even in-sessional EAP and language support, which is often represented as for overseas students, is available to all, and also supports non-native English speaking students categorized as ‘home’ students for fee-paying purposes. International fee-paying students, therefore, do not have access to a specialized, targeted range of services that high fees might imply. Third, institutions do not set their prices with reference to the ‘product’ on offer. Oduoza (2009) suggests that it is often challenging to make an accurate accounting of the costs of an individual school, particularly in terms of central administration, overheads and so on. Unlike more traditional commodities, higher education pricing is not directly tied to the cost of providing the services, and the educational offering at two different price points may not be quantifiably distinct in terms of course content, teaching methods, contact hours, staff expertise and so on. Tuition fee levels rather reflect the relative prestige and potential labour market value of degrees from different universities (Marginson, 2013).

High prices and the construction of international students in general as cash cows for the institution in the nation lead to the presumption that all international students as individuals are wealthy. Xie et al. (2020) identified ‘nouveau riche’ as a significant negative stereotype experienced by Chinese students in the United States. In this study, several students reported overtly discriminatory behaviours directed towards apparently rich Chinese students. Certainly most Chinese students, the largest group of international students
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in the UK, self-fund – Iannelli and Huang (2014) put this estimate at 82 per cent overall and 90 per cent for undergraduates. However, this does not necessarily mean that they are personally wealthy. Choudaha, Orosz and Chang’s (2012) study indicated that many students could be categorized as financially either ‘striving’ or ‘struggling’. There is limited national level data available on international students’ funding sources, but our interviews with Chinese students suggest that self-funding is a term that conceals a wide range of financial strategies, including extended family contributions and family savings over several years of preparation. As Forbes-Mewett et al. (2009) highlight, such dependence can create its own challenges and 37 per cent of students in their survey in Australia experienced financial difficulties. The Covid-19 pandemic left many students in the UK without access to part-time work and some became dependent on food banks for survival (Popp, 2021). UK universities’ economic dependence on international students is therefore not an unproblematic exchange of luxury services for high prices. The notion of education exports masks complex trade-offs and sacrifices that take place on both a global and an intensely private stage.

Recruitment Practices

Countries that rely heavily on, or are seeking to improve or increase their international student recruitment often engage in national-level activities to enhance their attractiveness on the global stage. What is possible for countries to do depends significantly on governance and policy structures (Geddie, 2015). Countries with more centralized policy regimes such as the UK, Australia and China are able to mobilize a wider range of resources and activities than those with decentralized governance structures such as the United States. China has, for instance, increased scholarship opportunities available to international students (Mulvey and Lo, 2021) in line with its broader ambitions to internationalize the higher education sector and grow its soft power. Like China, the UK aims to attract more international students, and the 2019 International Education Strategy (DfIT and DfE, 2019) set the target of 600,000 international students in higher education by 2030. Framed as part of education exports, this strategy, like others before, sees international students as an opportunity for income generation. This relies on a national-branding campaign which includes higher education (Lomer, Papatsiba and Naidoo, 2018). This comprehensive national brand enables the promotion of the higher
education sector overseas, associating British universities with other ‘pillars’ of the campaign including creativity, innovation, technology and so on. In this initiative, we see the adoption of practices more commonly associated with traditional businesses becoming mainstream in international higher education.

Centralized policy regimes also enable countries such as the UK to introduce initiatives beyond the domain of education which shape its attractiveness, and immigration policy is a key domain. For instance, the recent reintroduction of the post-study work visa scheme has been welcomed by the sector and international students alike, and may remedy the decline in numbers particularly from India observed in the wake of the original removal of this scheme in 2011 (Lomer, Papatsiba and Naidoo, 2018). Chinese student numbers, in contrast, rose dramatically during the same period, suggesting a greater focus on credentials and short-term educational experiences. For many years, at least until the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic, Australia and Canada were for example able to implement a points-based immigration system which became an attractive option for those international students seeking long-term mobility opportunities overseas (Geddie, 2015).

On the institutional level, universities are able to set their own strategies within the structures of the national policy context. In many cases, UK universities make international student recruitment a key part of their institutional strategy or mission statement (Yang et al., 2022). This is sometimes set in the form of specific targets for recruitment, but often framed more broadly within the context of internationalizing and global engagement (Lewis, 2021). Out of the 134 strategy documents identified for inclusion in this project, 59 mentioned increasing or enhancing international student recruitment. While this was often couched in broader terms around increasing the attractiveness of the institution, increasing numbers of international students was a dominant strategy. Lewis (2021) concurs, finding that, of those strategic plans with explicit key performance indicators, the most commonly applied indicator was the recruitment of international students. In our analysis, several specifically cited it as fundamental to institutional survival, while others emphasized the educational and curricular benefits of a more diverse student body. These strategies can be said to be drawing upon the educational rationale for international student recruitment (Lomer, Papatsiba and Naidoo, 2018).

A clear trend in these documents is nuanced awareness of the perceived challenges and problems around international student recruitment in the UK to date. There is an emphasis on ‘high quality’, ‘talented’ and ‘the best’ international students, in addition to an emphasis on diversity. The former focus on ‘quality’
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echoes the discursive shift in national policy from 2006 to 2016 (Lomer, Papatsiba and Naidoo, 2018), implicitly referring to an understanding that there has been a trade-off between the numbers of international students and academic selectivity. This has resulted in a perception held by some academic staff and media (e.g. BBC, 2012) that the ‘quality’ of international students is not appropriate (Lomer, Mittelmeier and Carmichael-Murphy, 2021), despite apparent equivalence in formal admissions requirements. This narrative intersected with the anti-immigration rhetoric driven by the far right in British politics, in the context of the Brexit debate, generating an emphasis in national policy on getting ‘the right students’. ‘Diversity’ refers implicitly to the shared understanding of international student recruitment as dominated by students from mainland China, who account for 35 per cent of non-EU student admissions in the UK (Johnson et al., 2021). The apparent lack of diversity compromises the potential for international and intercultural exchange in classrooms and on campuses, and teaching staff in a recent interview study (Lomer, Mittelmeier and Carmichael-Murphy, 2021) confirmed that in some student cohorts only a few nationalities were represented. However, this reductive understanding of diversity focuses on an ethno-national understanding of culture and disregards other dimensions of diversity which are given more prominence in domestic widening participation narratives. Not all students from China are the same, in other words. The persistent deficit narrative particularly associated with students from mainland China (Moosavi, 2020b) underpins this strategic emphasis. From a business perspective, this ‘over-reliance’ also creates a future risk should the ‘bubble’ of recruitment from China burst (Johnson et al., 2021).

More pragmatically, institutions can develop a range of courses designed to increase international student recruitment. Pre-sessional courses are increasingly common to provide opportunities for students to increase their English language level prior to starting their main degree course. It is challenging to gain a sense of the scale and scope of pre-sessional provision, as this is not reported separately through any of the national UK datasets. However, our subjective impression is that most universities with substantial international student numbers would offer these programs. Many universities also offer articulation or top-up programs in affiliation with international partners, such that international students can complete the final year of study in the UK and receive a degree certificate from the UK institution. Also, many institutions offer international foundation years or pre-Masters courses, creating an additional route of entry where academic qualifications are considered insufficient for direct entry. Increasingly, these programs are delivered by private pathway
providers, such as Kaplan, INTO, StudyGroup and Navitas (Universities UK, 2014). Around 40 per cent of non-EU HEI students in 2011 in the UK entered via one of these providers. The latter example indicates how the intensification of market activities shapes contemporary international student recruitment. Finally, some universities may create additional degree programmes that bear substantial similarities to existing provision, for the purposes of generating additional recruitment, as reported in recent student interviews. Taken together, these examples show how UK universities look for multiple opportunities to generate income through international student recruitment.

Education Agents

Education agents are an increasingly important, but often less discussed, actor in the field of international student recruitment. They mediate between international students and recruiting education providers. As private entities, they provide a range of services from counselling students, preparing application documents and supporting institutions with marketing promotion (BUILA, 2021) – and charge commission from institutions and/or fees from students. In this section, we draw on several linked research projects led by Ying Yang which explore the role of education agents in China in shaping the international higher education trajectories of Chinese postgraduate students (Yang et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2022).

BUILA (2021) estimates that 50 per cent of international students in the UK used the services of an education agent to help gain admission and navigate visa processes. Agents are therefore seen as essential to the UK’s international student recruitment. Particularly during the uncertainties of the Covid-19 pandemic, agents filtered and interpreted the rapidly changing information coming from institutions and governments to support students in applying and preparing to study (Yang et al., 2022). Our research with prospective Chinese international students who used education agents to apply to UK universities indicates that overall agents’ input into the university application process, including both practical and emotional support, is recognized and appreciated by all the participants (Zhang, Yang and Hoh, 2021). Agents also play an important role in supporting student recruitment from India, Nigeria, Malaysia, Vietnam and Pakistan (BUILA, 2021). Not all recruiting countries have historically relied on agents to the same extent, however, and the United States has only recently come to accept their presence (Wang, Wang and Jiang, 2020). Students commented on
how much choice they had between agents, highlighting the scale and diversity of the industry. They interpreted this level of activity as signifying recruiting universities’ need for international students, and universities’ reliance on education agents legitimated them as a whole.

In the Chinese context, education agents support institutions in recruiting international students. They promote international student recruitment overall by disseminating information about studying abroad, facilitating the process and bridging the information gap (Yang et al., 2022). Agents can mediate between the country, university and the student, to make sense of information, regulations and create accurate expectations about prospective student experiences. Operating independently, agents gain a sense of which universities or programmes are ‘offer machines’, where students are effectively guaranteed an offer regardless of their background because the institution needs international students and which are more selective (Yang et al., in press). Except where they operate in partnership, education agents can be situated as supporting international student recruitment as a whole, rather than for specific institutions. Partnerships between universities and agencies, which take a range of contractual forms (Huang, Raimo and Humfrey, 2016), can offer more targeted promotion and support from delegated offer-making to separate application systems, developed exclusively for students applying through partnerships (BUILA, 2021). However, agents are often less motivated to work with institutions with lower profiles and rankings in international markets (who typically most ‘need’ students), since their student clients tend to seek access to more elite, famous institutions. This confirms the preliminary analysis of international tuition fee levels in relation to institutional reliance on overall tuition fee income.

While the need for agents’ services, both from universities and students, is significant, unregulated business practices with low minimum standards of service raise concerns about ethics, particularly among sole traders (BUILA, 2021). This can compromise students’ opportunities to study abroad and cause reputational damage to host institutions misrepresented through over-optimistic counselling or indeed lead to outright forgery and cheating (Wang, Wang and Jiang, 2020). Accurate advice and representation from qualified and well-trained agents is essential for institutions to sustain a long-term approach to international student recruitment. Students in our interviews mentioned concerns such as provision of insufficient information, less effective advice on universities or programmes and grammar mistakes in the essay editing such as verb tense and spelling. Many appear to empathize with education agents
and their limitations, which in a way imply development or enhancement of their relationship with agents in the course of application. However, it should be acknowledged that students in the research all achieved ideal application results, which probably results in commenting positively on agents’ function in students’ application process, but it still effectively reflects the value of agents. Nevertheless, most suggested that they would not use agents again because they found the process less complicated than they originally imagined.

The complexity of education agents’ position in the marketized field of international higher education is revealed in the dynamics of payment. Nearly all (97 per cent) of education agents get a commission from universities, often a percentage of the first year’s tuition fee (BUILA, 2021). In some cases, agents would not charge students for their core services, which are covered by the commission. In others, smaller companies might link up with a larger agency to obtain a part-share of the commission. Agents also receive other perquisites from some institutions, including expenses-paid visits as training opportunities. Most agencies have a range of ancillary fee-paying services such as language classes, travel services, visa application support, internship placements, help with personal statements, interview preparation, among others (Yang et al., 2020). Paying for these additional services creates an additional financial burden to students. In the case of language support, for example, the expectation is created that students will pay for additional language classes, sometimes multiple expensive exams (the IELTS exam being in itself highly marketized) (Pearson, 2019) to meet the admissions standards set by universities. It can thus be seen that marketization of international higher education engenders more financial barriers to international students. Since universities benefit so greatly from international students’ presence, both economically and pedagogically, why is this burden placed on students rather than institutions?

Yet students perceived these fees as reasonable given the average price in the current market, the number of applications they submitted, as well as the level of agents’ engagement. Compared with the tuition fee and living expenses abroad, all the participants view the service fee as an affordable and small ‘insurance investment’. Students understood themselves as consumers, friends and students in relation to their agents, which makes them able to negotiate their expectations with agents directly.

Taken together, education agents have become a significant part of the marketized international higher education as they fundamentally contribute to generating economic benefits by effectively promoting international student recruitment in different key and emerging markets. For example, ‘education
agents contribute approximately £11.88 billion (including tuition fees and all the living expenses) to the UK economy each year’ (BUILA, 2021: 32). Education agents also facilitate the evolution of international higher education into a positional good in the forms of stimulating competition between universities, accentuating information gaps between students and universities and charging additional fees to students, fostering education inequities in the international higher education market.

**Ethical Issues for Education**

Having established that recruiting institutions rely heavily on international students for tuition fee income and deploy a range of recruitment strategies to attract and enrol them, we now turn to the ethical dimensions of what happens in the classroom of British universities.

International students tend to get lower marks at undergraduate level than home students. There is a persistent though undramatic gap between the level of degree awarded on graduation for international domiciled students in the UK, compared to UK domiciled or EU students. At undergraduate level (the only level on which national attainment data is published), a smaller proportion of students domiciled outside the EU consistently attain first class degrees (27 per cent) than either British (34 per cent) or EU students (40 per cent). They get proportionally lower second class (21 per cent, vs 14 per cent UK and 11 per cent EU) and third class or pass degree marks (4 per cent, vs 3 per cent UK and 2 per cent EU) (HESA, 2021). These differences are not enormous, but they represent slight improvements over the last several years, suggesting that the awarding gap is entrenched. The data reported above are the only data published on this issue by Higher Education Statistics Authority (HESA), and it is not further disaggregated by institution, subject or more detailed demographic attributes. This is in stark contrast to the Office for Students’ recent publication of an interactive data dashboard, which includes data on attainment and widening participation indicators for British domiciled students, building on an increased awareness of awarding gaps for British Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students. The epistemic exclusion of international students from equivalent indicators (Hayes, 2019) is superficially pragmatic, since data such as international employability indicators and postcode level information is not available for internationally domiciled students and is highly significant to the British widening participation policy.
context. However, it also serves to camouflage this persistent difference in awards, as Tannock (2018) has discussed.

Multiple institutions have separately identified an awards gap in relation to international students, including the University of Keele and University College London. However, these are complicated by questions of ethnicity and racism. There is an obvious intersection between groups minoritized in the British context, such as, for example, Black African or East Asian students, and between those racialized as white as the ‘default’, such as EU students (Madriaga and McCaig, 2019: 2). EU-domiciled students outperform both British students and international students in the first-class degree category, implying a racialized pattern since the vast majority of EU students would be racialized as ‘white’ in the UK context. Indeed, interviews with lecturers (Lomer, Mittelmeier and Carmichael-Murphy, 2021) frequently differentiated between EU or US students and the implied norm of the ‘East Asian’ international students. While these statistics cannot disaggregate between ethnic groups or particular domiciles which previous literature has shown to be relevant (Gemmell and Harrison, 2020; Iannelli and Huang, 2014), it does support the interpretation that outcomes gaps may be linked to the racialization of international students.

In particular, Iannelli and Huang (2014) found that Chinese first-degree graduates were persistently awarded lower class degrees than their home and other international counterparts. In contrast, Gemmell and Harrison’s (2020) analysis, conducted on a distance learning postgraduate course, found that Black African, Arab and Black Caribbean students had lower GPA than White, Chinese and Asian students, and concluded that ethnicity was the strongest predictor of outcomes. However, as literature on the BAME outcomes gap has highlighted, ethnicity is unlikely to be the ‘effective variable’ (Gayton, 2020), once a biological model of race in relation to academic achievement has been discounted as structurally and historically racist and empirically unsound. Rather, ethnicity is the most readily collected piece of data that indicates there is a ‘pattern of racialised attainment’ (Decolonising SOAS Working Group, 2018). Underpinning this pattern may be dynamics of linguistic prejudice and implicit hierarchies that situate ‘native speaker Englishes’ as ‘superior’.

Because their (non-native speaker international students) use of English differs from ‘standard’ (i.e. native) English, … they may find they have marks deducted from their written work and sometimes oral presentations too, because their English is not sufficiently nativelike. They will therefore graduate with lower
grades than their home student peers, purely on account of their English. (Jenkins, 2020: 64)

Moosavi (2021) suggests that East Asian students in particular are often stigmatized in relation to deficit narratives that position them as uncritical thinkers, frequent plagiarists and looking for an easier degree. The construction of both the skills of referencing and critical thinking as indicative of students' 'quality' ignores the extensive literatures that build on Bourdieu's (1977) depiction of acquisition of cultural capital as a social process, as well as the academic literacies framework that propose these skills as situated knowledges embedded in social networks and disciplines (e.g. Lea and Street, 1998).

Recent research with teaching staff in the UK (Lomer, Mittelmeier and Caemichael-Murphy, 2021) engaged with international students suggests that they are superficially positive about the presence of international students. Many were hampered in pedagogic innovation by large student numbers, workload resourcing constraints, limited time and resources for reflection on their own practices. Several described (and others reflected in their tone of voice) the sense of exhaustion compounded but not only caused by the particular demands of a Covid-19 academic year. They described a fairly consistent pedagogic approach, emphasizing opportunities for interaction, discussion, active learning and the structured delivery of content in small chunks. Many used technology-enhanced learning approaches to facilitate engagement across multiple modes. Few emphasized the importance of lecturing. But many explicitly stated that they would not change the teaching approaches with a different group of students such as international students, believing their approach reflected best practice in inclusion. While several teachers commented on their efforts to support international students in acquiring the skills and capabilities required for academic success in a UK university, few reflected on how their own or their department's curriculum, pedagogy and assessment decisions reinforce international students' marginalization. This approach continues to centre UK, and Western, norms as superior approaches to teaching, and therefore does not question the coloniality of such practices or their capacity to accidentally exclude or marginalize those who are Othered.

Further, deficit discourses are challenging to extricate themselves from even where they are committed to inclusivity and internationalization in principle. In particular, concerns about international students' language standards and learning skills including research, writing and referencing, critical thinking and oral participation in discussions and seminars were frequently mentioned.
Staff explained that they tried to teach inclusively and sought to embed or refer students to support to enable them to access the curriculum and engage with the teaching methods. However, few staff evinced a pedagogical approach that capitalized on the epistemic value of international students in the classroom beyond multicultural group work. In a few cases, staff either expressed their own view or reported on the views of others towards international students that were simply racist. It is possible that these enduring stereotypes of international students underpin awarding gaps.

An ethical international higher education should mean equal access to knowledge, learning opportunities, support and the possibility to reach equal standards of academic achievement. A persistent inequality in outcomes implies that there is inequality of access to these opportunities, raising ethical concerns about the state of teaching in the internationalized university classroom in the UK.

Conclusion

EAP as a domain of professional practice takes place within the context of marketization of international higher education. Both marketization and internationalization in the specific form of the recruitment of international students to study physically in a host country have become a norm. International higher education is more commonly understood as a private good that benefits the individual students, which legitimates the charging of tuition fee. Host countries and recruiting institutions invest in a range of recruitment practices aimed at increasing this income including national branding, strategy making, target setting and the development of particular products – courses such as pre-sessional programmes which incorporate EAP. The marketization of international higher education has also allowed the development of a specific profession, the education agent who mediates between aspiring international students and recruiting providers. Supported by commissions from recruiting universities, agents smooth the path of international applications and enable universities to reach wider markets and increase their enrollments. Agents also provide additional services which students may pay for directly, such as language classes, visa application support and travel support. Agents are therefore symbiotic with universities, working to expand the international education market and correspondingly entrenching its discourses.

The narrative that centres the economic benefits of recruiting international students, who pay far larger tuition fee than do home students in most countries,
represents the students as cash cows. These fee differentials privilege the already economically privileged and marginalize the experiences of less wealthy or struggling international students. These economic benefits are felt predominantly at the upper end of the sector in the UK, in Russell Group universities at the higher end of the rankings, and only to a very limited extent at the lower end of the rankings in smaller and lesser-known universities. While institutions and countries often contextualize the economic benefits in relation to educational benefits that result from a more diverse classroom, the impact that tuition fees have in shaping this diversity is rarely acknowledged.

Elite universities are therefore able to charge exorbitant tuition fees to international students, who gain access to limited additional resources and services. Unlike nearly any other marketized commodity, a higher price for an international university experience confers no additional privileges (other than visa support). Even access to in-sessional EAP support is rarely dedicated exclusively to international students and nor, from a perspective of equity in widening participation, should it be. Indeed, EAP is frequently under-resourced and positioned as a technical, centralized body, a place to refer international students or speakers of English as a second language when the pedagogic and curricular structures place them in deficit. This devalues EAP centres as secondary to disciplinary teaching, allowing departments to deflect challenges to the way language constructs meaning at the disciplinary level. By ascribing international student deficit to a ‘technical’ failing in the implementation of skills like academic style or citation practices and referring students out to EAP or in-sessional support, academics avoid the complex task of systematically evaluating established pedagogic practices of assessment and teaching.

International students act as an economic resource for universities but are not themselves resourced. Educational interventions that might help to structure and promote learning through diversity are neither appropriately resourced or conceptualized. Academic staff feel stretched and exhausted, asked to teach large groups of international students with no additional support or teaching assistants. They rely on their best knowledge of inclusive pedagogy, without further training that might help them to organize these principles in relation to an international and globalizing space. Instead, universities draw on dominant deficit discourses with reference to international students, constructing them as academically lacking and in need of further support in the form of EAP or paid-for pre-sessional or pathway courses. This academic marginalization may help to explain the racialized patterns of student outcomes, which see international students systematically underperforming home and EU-domiciled students.
International higher education is marketized in both its practices and its discourses. This is unlikely to change in the near future. What reflexive professionals in this context can achieve is a considered critical awareness of the forces that structure international student recruitment to reflect on the ethical tensions that emerge in our daily practice.

Notes

1 The Reddin survey is an annual survey coordinated by the Complete University guide, with publicly available data from 2006 to the present. It is a voluntary survey.
2 We use the term here of awarding gap to avoid implications of ability on the part of the student. This discussion has emerged in the context of Black, Asia and Minority Ethnic (BAME) student achievement debates, which frame the language of ‘achievement’ and ‘attainment’ as connoting individual responsibility. The language of ‘awards’ or ‘outcomes’ connote institutional responsibility and it is the latter that we wish to emphasize.

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