Cash cows. Milking Indian students in Australia

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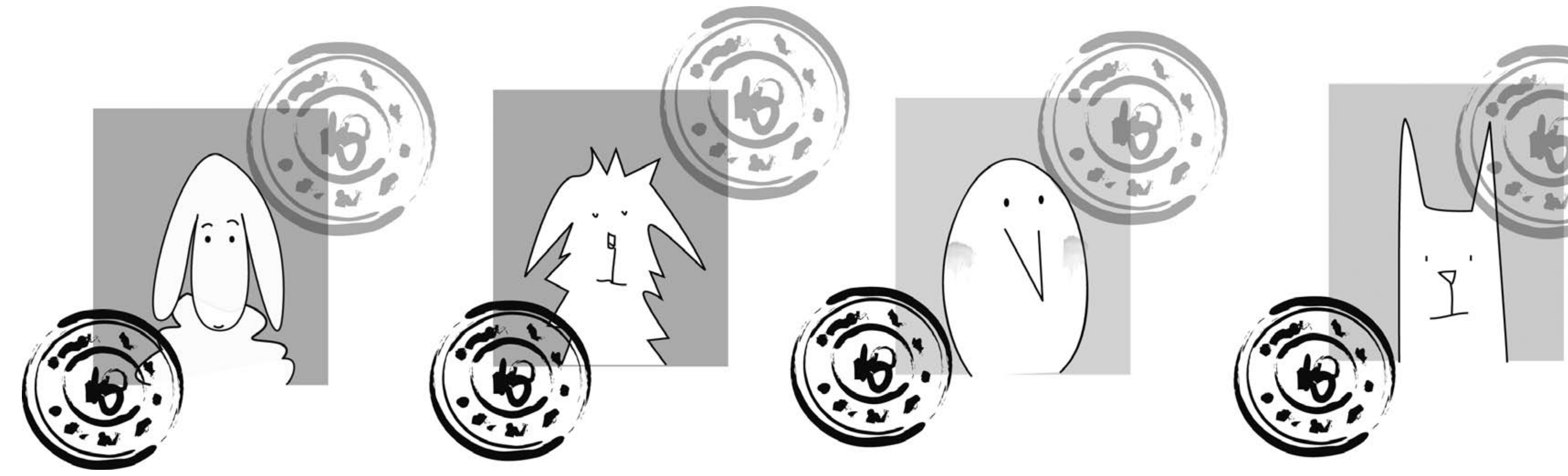

CASH COWS

milking Indian students in Australia

On 14 March 2006 Australian newspaper *The Age* reported on a group of international students at Central Queensland University's Melbourne campus planning a hunger strike to protest being treated like cash cows. The students, citing inadequate facilities, claimed CQU just wanted their money. While the strike was called off as students feared cancellation of their visas, the matter is far from settled.

Michiel Baas

Central Queensland University is among Australian universities that rely on international student tuition; almost half of its 24,000 students are international. The Melbourne campus has 3,753 international students of whom many are Indian. By and large, Indian students come to Australia not for higher education, but hopes of permanent residency. The Australian education industry is aware of this and many universities and colleges use it when marketing their courses abroad.

In my fieldwork in Melbourne in 2005, I gathered data on 230 international students, 130 of them from India. I interviewed education and migration agents, international programme directors, educational institution CEOs, tutors, lecturers, professors, social workers, student advisors, counsellors, student union leaders and members, Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA) personnel, psychologists, marketing personnel, market analysts, international student recruiters, and Indian community leaders and members.

The education industry

International students are a financial cornerstone of the Australian education industry. According to a recent article in *The Australian*, the education industry had a turn-over of A$6.9 billion in 2005. Indian students alone spent A$585 million, double what they spent only two years ago.[1] In 2005, 344,815 full-time international students were enrolled in Australian higher education programmes. The number of Indian students (27,661) was second only to Chinese students (81,184) but represented an annual increase (33.5%) that outpaced all others (students from China: 17.8%; from Korea: 10.9%).[2] Selling education to overseas students is one of the largest service export industries in Australia – thousands of jobs depend on it.

Indian students are recruited in different ways. The non-profit organisation IDP,[3] jointly operated by 38 Australian universities, is one of the largest recruiters with offices in all major cities except Calcutta. Almost half the students who come to Australia are recruited by IDP; others come with the help of so-called education agents, whose credentials are often vague. Although they are supposed to give information on education, many double as migration agents, advising potential students how to become permanent residents in Australia after graduation.

From student to migrant

A successful permanent residency application currently requires two years of higher education in a field that the Australian government designates as being in demand. The applicant must be 30 years old or younger and pass an English language test. The rules are generally clear, but often change. Once a student decides to study in Australia, it generally takes 6 to 12 months to find a suitable course, gain admission and prepare the documents to apply for a student visa. The decision to study in Australia is often based on the permanent residency requirements then in effect. But before the student is actually able to apply, two to three years pass during which the rules often change.

Paying for the education without falling into financial ruin often depends on acquiring permanent residency status. Two years of overseas education generally costs an Indian student A$30,000-50,000 – excluding books, housing and food. Most Indian students take out a loan for which they often mortgage family property. This puts pressure on students from the very beginning: they know it will be difficult to repay the loan in India, and that they have burdened their families. Interest due on the loan puts pressure on family finances; most students try to start repaying the loan as soon as possible, while studying.

Most students I met sought part-time jobs soon after their arrival in Australia, admitting they had known this would be necessary. Most had high hopes of landing a job in their chosen field, but this proved more difficult than anticipated. Lack of work experience and lack of time – as they needed money to cover immediate living expenses – prevented them from finding 'appropriate' jobs. Most ended up accepting low-paying jobs requiring no prior experience. International students are by law allowed to work only 20 hours per week during the semester. Many students, however, admitted working far more hours than allowed, simply because they had no choice. Not a few students were arrested for violating visa regulations and sent to so-called detention centres to await deportation back to India.

Opportunity or exploitation?

Those involved in the education industry are well aware of the situation; recruiters and others involved know the 'real' reason Indian students come to Australia. Those I talked to explained that they often go to India to organise educational fairs and symposia where students can ask questions about what it takes to come to Australia. Besides questions on permanent residency, most questions, I was told, were of a practical nature: how to get a student loan, how much interest must be paid, whether the loan can be repaid by staying in Australia after graduating. Almost everyone on the recruiting side told similar stories about their experiences in India, especially how it was unavoidable to talk about migration. Some recruiters explained that one has to be realistic about why these students want to go abroad.

It is not only the education industry that profits from the Indian middle-class desire to live overseas. To meet living expenses and repay loans, many Indian students took poorly paid night-time jobs in petrol stations, 7-11 supermarkets and restaurants. These businesses were often run by migrants who paid employees cash-in-hand. The lack of a paper trail allowed students to work more than the allowable 20 hours per week, but also let employers pay below the minimum wage. When asked why they accepted exploitation, students explained they had no choice: it was hard to find a decent job, while families back home were pressed to meet the monthly interest payments. Employers were often aware of this. They also knew that if one student decided not to put up with the low pay, another one would. Desperate students competed with each other, those asking the least rewarded with the extra hours necessary for survival.

The reality contrasts sharply with the Benetton ad-like multiculturalism with which Australian universities market themselves abroad. The international student market is highly competitive and universities the world over consider India a high growth market. When Australian Prime Minister John Howard recently visited India, he stated, 'the deep association between [India and Australia], the growing commercial links, the greatly enhanced political dialogue, the extraordinary growth of the Indian economy – all of these things bode well for an increase in the flow of students.'[4] That's exactly what Australian universities are hoping for, as China develops its own education industry, and the number of students from traditional markets such as Malaysia and Singapore level off.

As is clear to most in the industry, Indian student enrolment largely depends on their eligibility for residency after graduation. Many Indian students now realise the difficulties, but many still hope that the rules will change in their favour or that new opportunities will present themselves once they reach Australia. This hope is something the industry likes to keep alive. The Melbourne campus of the University of Ballarat now offers a six-month course to become a certified Hindi translator. By successfully completing the course, a student earns five migration points.[5] Education agents will undoubtedly know how to inform their clients of this opportunity. <

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Notes

1. 23 March 2006. *The Australian*.
2. Australian Education International: http://aei.dest.gov.au/Aei/Default.aspx.
3. IDP stands for International Development Programme. The name was officially changed to IDP Education Australia in 1994. The meaning of IDP no longer serves a marketing purpose. It is simply 'IDP'.
4. www.news.com.au/story/0,10117,18396429-2,00.html
5. An international student needs to score 120 points on a points test to apply for permanent residency after graduation. Points are given based on a skills assessment, English language knowledge, completion of two years of full-time study in Australia and age.