



**‘I’m not like that, why treat me the same way?’ The impact of stereotyping international students on their learning, employability and connectedness with the workplace**

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**Title:**

*“I’m not like that, why treat me the same way?” Stereotyping international students as ‘migration hunters’ and its impact on their learning, employability and connectedness with the workplace*

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**Abstract**

A significant body of literature on international education examines the experiences of international students in the host country. There is however a critical lack of empirical work that investigates the dynamic and complex positioning of international students within the current education-migration nexus that prevails international education in countries such as Australia, Canada and the UK. This paper addresses an important but under-researched area of the education-migration landscape by examining how the stereotyping of students as mere 'migration hunters' may impact their study and work experiences. It draws on a four-year research project funded by the Australian Research Council that includes more than 150 interviews and fieldwork in the Australian vocational education context. Positioning theory is used as a conceptual framework to analyse how generalising international students as 'mere migration hunters' has led to the disconnectedness, vulnerability and marginalization of the group of international students participating in this research.

**Introduction**

Transnational skill mobility and global competition for skilled human capital have accelerated over the past few decades. To address the current labour and skill shortages mainly due to ageing and fertility decline, recent policy efforts in countries such as Australia, Canada and the UK lean more towards retaining international student graduates from domestic universities rather than attracting migrants from off-shore (Gribble & Blackmore, 2012; Hawthorne, 2013; Robertson, 2011). This policy focus is driven by the common assumption about the advantage of international students as potential migrants based on their domestically relevant educational qualifications and skills, locally recognised credentials, familiarity with the host culture and host-country language ability (Hawthorne, 2013). In Australia, promoting the education-migration pathway has been perceived as the government win-win policy. This policy capitalises on the lucrative education export market as international education is the biggest service export industry generating 16.6 billion dollar for the national economy in 2014 (Hare, 2015). At the same time, the policy helps to attract and retain skilled locally trained human capital. This policy affects all education sectors including higher education (HE), vocational education and training (VET) and schools.

Around the world, there are approximately 4.5 million students pursuing overseas study (OECD, 2014). VET was the fastest growing sector in the number of international student enrolments in Australia between 2005 and 2009 and currently ranks second behind the HE sector, despite the turbulence caused by the collapse of a number of 'shonky' private colleges and changes to Australia's skilled migration

policy. There are at present 149,785 international student enrolled in VET (AEI, 2015). The period 2009-2010 witnessed a crisis to the VET sector as a number of VET private colleges actively marketed their courses as providing the pathway to migration rather than the study opportunity and did not invest in ensuring a quality education for international students (Marginson et al., 2010; Perkins, 2009; Tran, 2013). In 2010 the Australian government amended the General Skilled Migration Scheme in ways that restricted courses popular with many international VET students, emphasised high level qualifications, readjusted point allocation and required independent skills testing of graduates. Maximum priority is given to applicants with employer or regional sponsorship (DIAC, 2010). These policy changes have reduced the link between vocational education and permanent residency (Tran & Nyland, 2011). The Centre for Population and Urban Research's Immigration Overshoot Report (CPUR, 2012) indicates that between a half of and two thirds of international students returned to their countries of origin after graduation in 2011-2012 and the rest remained in Australia on temporary visa, further study visa, tourist visa or permanent residency visa.

The development of international education-migration pathway in VET over the past decade has been associated with a sweeping generalisation of international VET students as mere 'migration hunters' or 'PR hunters'<sup>1</sup> who do not have a genuine interest in learning and accordingly colleges are seen as 'migration factories' or 'PR factories' (Bass, 2006; Birrell et al. 2009; Birrell & Healy, 2010; Kinnaird, 2015). However, little is known about how such labelling has impacted international students' learning and connectedness with the workplace and the broader community. This paper aims to respond to this paucity in the literature by analysing the detrimental effects of the stereotyping of international students as mere 'migration hunters'.

This paper emerges from a research project funded by the Australian Research Council that examines the learning and engagement of international students within the migration-education nexus. The research includes more than 150 interviews with international students and teachers as well as fieldwork in 25 colleges in Australia. Using positioning theory as a conceptual framework, the research shows that for the international student participants in this research, a mere 'PR hunter' is an unwanted and unjust transnational identity imposed on them. This fails to recognise their career aspirations and multiple identities defined and redefined by their own subjectivity as well as their interaction with transnational social spaces.

This paper begins with a discussion of the research on the education-migration nexus that prevails international education in Australia. We then proceed to discuss the use of positioning theory as a conceptual framework and the research design. The subsequent section analyses the key themes emerging from the data including the effects of the generalisation of international students as 'PR hunters' on teaching and learning practices and student employability and connectedness with the workplace.

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<sup>1</sup> PR is the abbreviation of permanent residency commonly used in Australia

We conclude by addressing the implications for the institutional community to foster a more inclusive environment for international students.

### **International students in the education-migration pathway**

There is a significant body of research exploring the relationship between international education and migration (Baas, 2006; Birrell & Perry, 2009; Hawthorne, 2013; Robertson, 2011, 2013; Tang et al., 2014; Valentin, 2014). These include the nature and characteristics of the study-migration pathway (Hawthorne, 2013), international students' motivations for migration (Robertson, 2011, 2013), their future aspirations, and their career and migration trajectories in the country of education (Tang et al., 2014). Neilson (2009) points out the unintended consequences of the education-migration nexus including the changing demographics of students seeking PR, education providers' conscious provision or expansion of courses which are given advantage in PR pathways, and the adaptation of the marketing of courses to prospective students. **While VET pedagogy aims to promote equal opportunities and access for all students and the inclusion of diversity, the marketing of courses attached with PR advantages appears to be predominantly oriented towards students as migration hunters rather than education for all.** Robertson (2001, p.2207) argues that 'this all contributed to public backlash against migrants as undesirable subjects but also contrastingly against the system as exploitive. International students were thus simultaneously and contradictorily portrayed as opportunists and victims.'

The discourse around international VET positions international students as a needed and undesired group at the same time. There seems to be a contradictory positioning of international students in Australian nation-state from different actors: as a much valued group by the institution versus an unwanted marginalised group in the workplace/community. Even within the institutional discourse, there is a contradiction in institutional policy and pedagogic reality with regard to the positioning of international students. Institutional websites and policy documents represent them as valuable members with regards to both their cultural and consumer capitals. However, in reality, pedagogic practices mainly construct them as 'the other' and insufficient pedagogic investment has been made to capitalise on their cultural backgrounds and experiences to enrich the teaching and learning for all (Leask, 2009; Ryan, 2011; Tran & Nguyen, 2015; Tran, 2011). In the media and public discourse, international students are positioned mainly within the consumer frame and deficit model. For example, the recent ABC Four Corners episode's Degrees of Deception (2015) construct international students as no more than victims, cheaters or migration hunters. Nevertheless, Robertson (2011) rightly observes that Australia has not yet developed nuanced understandings of the international student experiences in the education-migration space. Thus this paper fills this gap in our existing knowledge by analysing how the international students who participated in this research position themselves and the impact of the social positioning on them within the education-migration nexus.

Constructing international students in VET, especially who study hospitality subjects as ‘PR hunters’, Birrell et al. (2009) claim international students are interested in investing in cookery courses as a step stone to migration. Subsequently, Birrell and Perry (2009) argue that since international students can potentially earn little if they return to work in developing countries with a VET cooking credential, their investment in Australian education must be to secure permanent residency. These authors maintain ‘the overseas students were prepared to pay for this instruction [cookery course], so it was alleged, because it led to a permanent residence (PR) visa’ (Birrell et al., 2009:63). These authors’ assumption lumps all international VET students into a homogenous group while ignoring the career aspirations and the genuine desire to return and work in their home country of a number of international students.

While works by Baas (2005, 2006) provide a useful account on the experiences of Indian students who use education as an entrance to permanent residency in Australia, it conveys the impression that the majority of Indian students, if not all, are PR hunters. In particular, the author emphasises permanent residence as a ‘form of compensation’ for an unsatisfactory education experience that Indian students are exposed to in Australia. In contrast, based on large scale empirical research with international students, Tran and Nyland’s (2011) study reveals the education-migration culture, into which many international students have immersed, to some extent, conditions and shapes their desire to migrate. Some international students did not have the original intention to migrate but their growing awareness of this migration-education nexus and their interaction with peers who are interested in migration influences their decision to apply for permanent residency. Tran and Nyland’s (2011) study further points out four main forms of the nexus between overseas study and migration. The first category includes students who are motivated to undertake international education with dual objectives to secure migration and to acquire the skills associated with their chosen occupation. The second one regards migration as a ‘second chance opportunity’, the third sees migration as the sole ultimate objective of overseas study and the fourth has lost the intention to migrate that they initially had (ibid., p.17).

### **Positioning theory as a conceptual framework to interpret the effects of stereotyping international students as mere PR hunters**

In this paper, Harré and van Langenhove’s (1999) positioning theory is used to analyse how international students self-position and are other-positioned by related actors as well as the conditions that shape these specific ways of positioning. Positioning theory focuses on identifying aspects of dominant discourse rules and conventions, rights, duties and obligations which are referred to as ‘the moral order’ in discursive practices (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). This theory is a useful conceptual tool to unpack students’ positions within the institutional structures and related communities, and how they perceive to be positioned in a specific ways (desirable or undesirable) by others in the discourse community. It allows an exploration of whether the subject in positioning accepts, accommodates or rejects dominant ways of constructing, viewing or making sense of a phenomenon and their

impacts. Harré et al. (2009, p.5) stress positioning theory is concerned with revealing the explicit and implicit patterns of reasoning that are realised in the ways that people act towards others.

Positioning theory indicates that when people engage in discourse as individuals or members of a group, they take up a certain position (Davies & Harré, 1990; van Langenhove & Harré, 1999). Hollway (1984, p.236) highlights 'discourses make available positions for subjects to take up. These positions are in relation to other people.' In this regard, conversations between individuals are statements of how things appear to the subject: the discursive construction of personal stories makes a person's actions intelligible and relatively determinate as social acts within which certain members of the conversation have specific locations. Viewed this way, international students, teachers, domestic/international peers and other members operating in the students' community are social actors whose ways of thinking and acting can be made intelligible by examining the ways they take up positions in conversations. In particular, Hollway (1984) indicates discourse is not limited to conversations amongst individuals as discourse can take place in the minds of individuals. Also, Harré and his colleagues (1999) argue that a distinctive feature of positioning as a social act is that positions are fluid, dynamic and open to challenge.

Positions are understood as clusters of rights, duties and obligations (Harré & Slocum, 2003). Hence, the ways students and teachers position themselves and each other are interrelated to their perceptions of their rights, duties and obligations within the moral order of the institutional context. Van Langenhove and Harré (1999, p.23) contend that 'the rights for self-positioning and other-positioning are unequally distributed and not all situations allow for or call for an intentional positioning of the participants.'

To interpret the impact of generalising international students as mere PR hunters, we use the following concepts of positioning: self-positioning, forced-self positioning, positioning of others and re-positioning. Self-positioning arises when a person takes on a particular stance and expresses his/her personal agency in order to achieve a particular goal in discursive practice (van Langenhove & Harré, 1999, p.24). This category is applied to interpret excerpts of interview data which are related to how students or teachers take up a specific position or stance when discussing the effect of the stereotyping on their practices. With regard to forced-self positioning, van Langenhove and Harré (1999, p.26) propose that it is different from deliberate self-positioning in that 'the initiative now lies with somebody else rather than the person involved.' In the case of this research, forced-self positioning is adopted to interpret how the students position themselves in the ways they think they are required or stereotyped by other actors. Other positioning is that one's intentional positioning of oneself in a certain way can lead to the positioning of someone else in the correlative position (van Langenhove & Harré, 1999). This category is used to interpret how students or teachers position other involved parties through the ways they express their own stance on an issue. Repositioning occurs when a person adopts a new position as a result of previous experiences and discussions. This concept is used to

interpret how the participants might shift their stance due to external influences, internal changes or previous experiences.

Adopting these frameworks of positioning theory, this paper focuses on the salient themes arising from international students' and teachers' views about the impacts of 'PR hunter' stereotypes on pedagogy, teachers' perspectives and students' connectedness with the classroom and host community.

## **Research Design**

This paper is derived from a four-year research project funded by the Australian Research Council through the Discovery scheme. The research aims to examine international VET students' learning and engagement experiences within host institutions as well as the broader community. It also examines teachers' views and adaptation of pedagogic work in teaching this cohort. The research draws on a qualitative approach. It includes interviews with more than 150 international students and staff and fieldwork conducted in dual-sector and VET institutions in three main states of Australia: New South Wales (NSW), Queensland (QLD) and Victoria (VIC).

After gaining the approval from the ethics committee at the University where the researchers were based, the student participants were selected based on the broad criteria that they are enrolled as an international student in either a public or private VET institute and they volunteer to participate in the research. The teachers selected for the research are those who are involved in teaching international students and are willing to participate in the research. International student and teacher participants were recruited through an invitation sent to the Director of International Program from their institute who helped circulate the invitation among their international students and teachers. Those who agreed to participate were asked to attend a face to face interview which lasted between 30 to 60 minutes. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. Second interviews were also undertaken with a small number of students who were willing to share with the chief investigator their experiences and changes as they progressed through the course during the first six months of their study. This paper focuses primarily on the semi-structured interview data with 105 international students and 50 staff members.

The key questions used in the interview with international students include: What are their purposes of undertaking the VET course? How do their purposes influence the way they learn? What do they think about the ways their teachers teach international students in VET? and Are there any stereotypes and generalisations that affect their learning and engagement in the community? For teachers, the primary lines of inquiry focus on how they perceive international students' purposes of investing in VET course, how these purposes might shape international students' learning and engagement and how they adapt their teaching to accommodate international students' study purposes and learning characteristics. The interview excerpts cited in this paper arose mainly from these questions.

A small number of excerpts which are typical of the data set were used in the paper due to the scope of the paper. The key themes on which this paper focuses and the relevant quotes were identified through a thorough process of coding using NVivo software, version 10. The researchers read the interview transcripts several times and utilised NVIVO software to categorise the interview data. The preliminary analysis was inductive and based on the themes and patterns that emerged from the coding. Then positioning theory (Harré and van Langenhove, 1999) is used to interpret the ways international students self-positioned and perceived how they were other-positioned by their teachers and other actors in the broader community to whom they relate. **Italics are used to highlight some parts of the interview excerpts that contain the key points conveyed by the participants.** To protect the confidentiality of the participants, their names and institutions are kept anonymous.

As explained in the above section, positioning theory (van Langenhove & Harré, 1999), especially its notions of right-duty, self-positioning, forced self-positioning and other-positioning are used to interpret the interview accounts. The discussion of the key findings in the next section uncovers uncomfortable realities about the adverse effects of the positioning of international students as those who see migration as the sole goal of overseas study on their learning and sense of belonging.

### ***'PR hunter' stereotype and effects on teaching practices***

Teachers' commitments to students, commitments to teaching and their capacity to enhance students' connectedness with learning and workplaces are essential for ensuring high quality educational practices. Yet, from the positioning of the students, teachers and support staff participating in this research, teachers' fulfilment of these duties can be considerably undermined if their pedagogic practices are overridden by the stigma attached to international students as 'mere PR hunters'. The following observations by the students in this study illuminate the repercussions of teachers' other-positioning of international students as migration hunters on their classroom interactions with international students and on the students' self-esteem:

I felt that my contribution is not valued. *That is because I am seen as someone who comes here to take something from the system, like a PR [permanent residency]. But I felt that they didn't recognise that I want to be part of it and contribute something [Crying].... Or just treat it as if, you know, like you take no interest in the class or even in the people around you. That really makes me angry if I see that. But I feel I'm not like that, why treat me the same way [as those who are only interested in migration, not learning]? (Indian Student, Community welfare, Public College, VIC).*

There is a lot of stigma that you're doing the TAFE [Technical and Further Education] course and getting residency. [...] on the very first day the Program Manager asked me, are you doing this for residency? [...] *it's like putting a label on me already you want to see me as someone who is after PR.*

*I feel that there is a stigma attached to it as if these students come here and they do the course just for migration [...] If you [teachers] treat us with suspicion all the time and say, well you're not really interested in learning, you're just here for the visa, then there's no help offered to us in finding placements (Indian Student, Nursing, Public College, VIC)*

In line with positioning theory, *forced-self positioning* is related to how students position themselves in the ways they think they are essentialised or stereotyped by other actors (van Langenhove & Harré, 1999). The above excerpts show that the international student participants are forced-self positioned as migration hunters, and such positioning contradicts with the multiple aspirations attached to the learner status that they bring into the classroom. From these students' viewpoint, their teachers' other-positioning of international students is riddled with bias. The students from the above excerpts believe that their teachers do not position international students as genuine learners, opposite to how they position themselves with endeavours to be engaged in the educational process and to make contributions to the wider community. This is strongly expressed by the Indian student in the first interview excerpt. Both of the students' forced-self positioning conveys their disappointment and indignation when all international VET students are automatically labelled as PR hunters, and on this account, their genuine ambitions are ignored, their motivations for learning are questioned and their identity is affronted. The students' criticism is in line with Tran and Nyland's (2011) compelling empirical evidence which challenges claims made by researchers such as Birrell and Perry (2009) that the only motive of all international VET students is to chase after PR. According to Tran and Nyland (2011), migration can be among the multiple purposes of overseas study that individual students embrace, but this goal can complement their aspiration for learning and for career advancement rather than contradicts them. Furthermore, the two authors also assert permanent residency is not necessarily behind every international student's pursuit of VET as a number of international students undertake overseas education with bona fide desire to return and to work in their home country.

The teacher and support staff respondents also concur with the students' observations. They contend that the stereotype can undermine teachers' sense of responsibility and take its toll on the teacher-student reciprocal educational experiences:

*Yeah, unfortunately I think a lot of them [teachers] have given up. And so there's a lot of just pass them, just pass them, just pass them. I think there's significant latitude given to international students because they don't care and they are only interested in PR, the teacher doesn't really care... Why should I try to teach them in different ways if they don't care about learning anyway? So there seems to be a bit of a cease-fire where, well I'll teach the minimum requirements. So really what we've done is we've just slipped into mediocrity... And I think the teachers just said, you know what? What's the point? I'm still getting paid my hourly rate. I'll make it easier for everyone. So we see more multiple-choice questions. We see things that are easier to mark*

because hey, they don't care. Why should I care? (Teacher, Hospitality Management, Private College, VIC)

And some head teachers even been quite rude to students and turn students away and say do other course, why don't you do other course? That course is higher point than my course [childcare]. [...] Say things like "you may want to consider studying another course that is more suited to your goal of getting residency."... Well this student came to me and the counsellor advised her to see me, the student is really interested in studying childcare, and doing quite well. She's not the one that really just wants to get the residency or fill in the time. (Support Staff, Public College, NSW)

These interview excerpts lend support to the student participants' positioning of themselves and of the teachers. In a similar vein with the students' self-positioning discussed above, the support staff's other-positioning of international VET students recognises their genuine interest in the subject and the heterogeneity of learning motivations in this cohort of students, just like other cohorts of students. Nevertheless, according to both the teacher and support staff's other-positioning of the teachers, these attributes of international students are not always appreciated by all VET teaching staff. The teacher mentions three times in this brief interview excerpt that a group of teachers hold a strong view that "they [international students] don't care" about learning. The support staff respondent also indicates that the able and ardent student can be misjudged and mistreated by the teacher who misconstrues the student's interests and goals because of the PR hunter stereotype.

The adverse impact of this unjust perception inflicted on international VET students' learning can be substantial. As remarked by the teacher, a number of his colleagues have dropped their teaching motivations, expectations and sense of responsibility. These teachers are deemed to consciously adopt the PR-hunter other-positioning of the students as an excuse for becoming lenient and unconcerned with the students' learning, and unmotivated in improving teaching quality. The support officer's reflection on the head teachers' confronting attitude and treatment towards international students reveals another inimical influence of teachers' stereotypical belief. When teachers choose to tag a PR hunter label on every international VET student, they not only fail to perform their duty to shape and facilitate the students' connectedness with learning; they also become an institutional hurdle that disconnects the students with genuine motivation for learning.

These observations of teachers' other-positioning and their pedagogic practices resonate Nespor's (1987) influential work on the importance of teachers' beliefs on teachers' teaching practices. Beliefs, according to Nespor (1987, pp. 318-319), are constituted by "existential presumption[s]" which are strongly personal, affective, evaluative and can be different from reality. Although beliefs are not necessarily evidence based and reliable, they exert a powerful influence on the holders' behaviours and decisions (Nespor, 1987; Rokeach, 1968; Sigel, 1985). Teachers'

different types of beliefs, including those towards the learners, have been well recognised to be imperative to teachers' behaviours (Archer, 1999; Nespor, 1987; Pettit, 2011; Thompson, 1992). Perego and Boyle (1997, cited in Pettit, 2011, p.124) remark that in English language teaching, for example, if teachers hold unjustified deficit beliefs towards learners, even when the teachers are well-intentioned, discrimination might happen unconsciously. Given the conceptual parallel between teachers' ontological belief and teachers' other-positioning of learners in light of positioning theory (van Langenhove & Harré, 1999), theories about teachers' beliefs are helpful in shedding light on the research finding about the impingement of teachers' other-positioning of international students as PR hunters on their teaching practices and their commitments to the students.

The data, especially the statement 'What's the point? I'm still getting paid my hourly rate. I'll make it easier for everyone', reveals the structural conditions within which VET teachers work and the social context of the stereotyping. VET is facing the increasing casualised and intensified workforce aiming at cost reduction for VET institutes (Productivity Commission 2011). VET teachers generally work in precarious and vulnerable conditions. Within the private VET institutes, to which the first interview excerpt above refers, most teachers involved in teaching international students often work as casuals or on a short-term contract. Their job is not secure and their contract mainly depends on the presence international students in their program (Tran, 2013). According to Nakar (2013) and Guthrie (2010), sessional teachers, which account for increasing proportions of the VET workforce, have limited access to professional development and support including how to deal with the challenges arising from changing student demographics. Therefore, these sociological conditions bear on their attitudes to their work and their teaching of international students, making them not invest seriously in their teaching, easily accept some common stereotypes at the face value and adopt a 'let it go' attitude.

Other teachers indeed challenge the mind-set that if international students see migration as the sole aim for their overseas study and are not intrinsically motivated to learn, then there is no need for teachers to be concerned about the quality of teaching and learning:

My: And do you think a lot of trainers would feel disappointed if they see some of their students who are not engaged in learning and are only interested in PR?

Lian: I do, but I see that as an excuse. Because I can easily that myself, I could say look, I know you're only here for PR and why should I bother? But again, as I get back to the fact, I as a trainer of hospitality, it's my responsibility to basically give them all the benefits and demonstrate to them what the benefits are. If they choose to take that in, that's their issue not my issue. My issue is to be there as a trainer and *I think that if I take the attitude of oh, you're only here for PR, I'm not really concerned about you, well I'm not doing my job.* So I have a certain responsibility as a trainer to do that. Look, it is hard and it's frustrating to have students sit there that you know are

really not passionate about it but you have an obligation to the others that are.  
(Teacher, Hospitality Management, Private College, VIC)

In light of positioning theory, the teacher in this interview positions teachers/trainers as professionals who take cognizance of their responsibilities and maintain high integrity in delivering the “job.” She concedes that students with low or no candid interest in learning could be “hard and frustrating” hurdles to a teacher. Yet she dismisses justifications for the teacher’s failure to fulfill their obligation on this account. Teachers or trainers, according to her self-positioning, have no right to compromise the education quality. Regardless of international students’ purpose of investment in the course, it is obligatory for teachers to consistently enact their responsibility as a teacher to optimise students’ learning, not only due to their sense of professional duty, but more importantly, for the sake of those students who are genuinely keen to learn. The teacher also comments on her approach to cultivating students’ sense of belonging to learning by helping them gain understanding of the “benefits” of the subject, guiding them towards a positive perception and more nuanced understandings of the potential attached to the professional field that they are studying. Such pedagogic belief in fulfilling their self-perceived responsibilities is the manifestation of “their commitments to students and commitments to teaching” (Firestone & Rosenblum, 1988, p.288). According to Firestone and Rosenblum (1988), the synergy of these two dimensions of teachers’ commitments has important implications for teachers’ emotional care for students, high expectations for students’ achievements and pedagogical interest.

Akin to the teacher’s opinion, the student participants’ other-positioning of the teachers also indicates teachers’ duties to nurture students’ connectedness with learning:

And I think if you [teachers] want someone to genuinely do the course or genuinely be part of your community then it’s your job to help them do that. So maybe help them find a good placement, help them under systems, help them learn. [...] I think well if you [teachers] want, if you really want to train students then you have to be interested in teaching. It’s not just the student that has to be interested in learning with. It works both ways. (Indian Student, Nursing, Public College, VIC)

[T]he teachers can find more pathways to the workplace because cookery you've got to learn it from the industry, school is also important but you also have got to be in a good restaurant to learn all the good stuffs. There can be many levels of finding jobs, they can, at least, provide us a list of fine restaurants in the city or in the area around or at least they can give us with reference letter or something like that so that we can get it in our resume. And more for the counselling about the job and also the pay/wage. (Korean Student, Cookery, Public College, NSW)

Both of the interviewees identify teachers' important responsibility to support VET students to gain access to and to learn in work placements, which are considered an integral component of VET programs. This other-positioning of teachers' professional responsibility resonates with the dominant trend in the current VET teaching and learning practice that focuses on "closer engagement in work-based learning" (Hillier, 2009, p.6). It is also well reflected in previous discussions of VET teachers' roles, which typically include teachers' facilitation of students' 'empirical learning' in the workplace (Attwell, 1999, p.192).

The Indian student in the above interview excerpt broadly points out two essential aspects of teachers' responsibilities in fostering international students' sense of belonging. She first underlines teachers' transformative agency in cultivating students' genuine inquisitiveness about learning, and that in order to do so, it is imperative that teachers be motivated about their own teaching. In addition, she positions teachers as the bridge that makes international students more connected to learning, the workplace and the host community. The articulation of teachers' responsibility towards international students' broadest sense of connectedness as an educational outcome echoes Tran's and Nguyen's (2015, p.14) accentuation of "teaching as cosmopolitan work" that aims to foster students' meaningful engagement with "local and global diversity." Together with the teacher's self-positioning, the student participants' other-positioning of the teachers identifies the following responsibilities of VET teachers: teachers are duty bound to maintain integrity and commitment to their students and their teaching job so that they are able to nurture students' connectedness with learning and to foster their engagement with the workplace as well as the wider community.

***Impact on international students' employability and connectedness with the workplace: "[E]mployers don't want to employ us"***

Work-based learning or learning in the workplace has been recognised as an essential dimension of vocational education and training (Attwell, 1999; Hillier, 2009). Research evidence suggests that the practice of linking international students to workplace opportunities varies among different VET institutes (Tran, 2013). For some institutes, such responsibility resides with the teachers or international students themselves while for others, it is an institutional responsibility. Nevertheless, international students' vocational experience and their connectedness with the workplace are vulnerable to discrimination. International students are portrayed as 'an exploited invisible workforce' (Nyland et al, 2009). While this victimisation happens when the students are already employed, this research also shows that international VET students in this study are depicted as *an undesirable workforce* because of the PR-hunter stereotype:

Yeah, if you go for the job of some places, they think that Indians are just for the permanent residence. But not everyone is like that... employers don't want to employ us... Saying they are students but they just don't want to study and

develop the skills, they just want to get PR. If so many persons in the industry and the teachers also saying that Indian students are not attempting as hard as other nationalities. *There are some students, Indian students, who are not studying hard or they're just after the PR or the job. So but not everyone is the same.* (Indian Student, Cookery, Public College, QLD)

Some employers are scared. They're scared that if I employ this person, all they're really going to do is want me to sign them off for PR. Then as soon as I sign them off for PR, they're gone. And that has happened in some cases. He signs the paper one day and the person's gone the next day. Is it going to upset my customers if I have too many overseas workers? And that can happen. I've got an employer out there that says, 'I would like to take on a Vietnamese baker but my customers would not allow that. So that would affect my business so I can't choose to do that.' (Teacher, Bakery, Public College, VIC)

These interview excerpts enunciate how the PR hunter stereotype diminishes the opportunities for international VET students to be employed in an Australian workplace. In light of positioning theory, international students are often other-positioned by both local employers and teachers as opportunistic PR hunters who lack commitment, diligence and genuine aspirations to learn and develop professionally. The Indian cookery student's reflection mirrors Bass's (2005, 2006) observation that Indian students are pervasively viewed as PR schemers, which is disproved by the student's self-positioning. The teacher's other-positioning substantiates the reported adversity against international students' employability, adding that not only employers, but also the customers, are sceptical and discriminatory against international students.

This finding reveals that barriers to international students' participation in the local workplace are complicated and accumulate from more than one source. While employers' hesitation is evident, teachers' role in assisting their students and lifting the stigma appears to be missing. Based on the Indian student's other-positioning, teachers' discriminating judgments about Indian students exacerbate the prejudice against this ethnic group in the local industry. In the case of a Vietnamese bakery student who was turned down because of the customers' disapproval of foreign workers as reflected in the above excerpt, outright racism from the host community intensifies social impediment on international students' engagement in the local workplace. This multiplicity of obstacles stymies those international students' access to a meaningful vocational experience and impinges on the sense of belonging that international students in this research seek to build up with the host society.

The sociological context also shapes employers' attitude towards international students and explains employers' inclination to take a cautious approach to employing international students. Both the student's self-positioning and teachers' other-positioning of international students concede the fact that there are international students who deploy tactics to take advantage of local employers for their PR hunt. Reporting on the social conditions of employing international students, Tran's (2013)

research also found that some employers are reluctant to take international students because they had prior experience with international students who left the organisation right after getting the work experience certificate for migration purpose, which may cause disruption to the workplace. Employers' reluctance might stem from the assumption that international students may leave the country after their graduation (Patrick et al., 2008). Moreover, employers' uncertainty about international students' visa regulations and work right in the host country is another structural barrier to their acceptance of international students into the workplace. Another social condition that affects employers' attitude is the recent media reports on how international students have been discriminated against and exploited at the workplace, which makes employers cautious about being caught with potential troubles in employing international students (Tran, 2013).

However, as the student participant comments "not everyone is like that [...] not everyone is the same," it is unfair to project every international student with identical and predictable motivations and behaviours of migration hunters. Similar to this observation, other students in this study also express their frustration over the automatic assumption that international VET students are only after PR:

One day in the kitchen, one of the guys asked me what does Stacy really wants to do? I mean like do you think this is not the thing that I really want to do? He just assumes that I am doing this for PR and anything like that. [...] *So it's kind of frustrating to be seen in those kinds of standard that if you are not a resident, and you are studying cookery so you must be after PR. You must only for PR.* So it is kind of frustrating (Korean Student, Cookery, TAFE, NSW)

My: And what did you feel when people stereotype you and put you under the umbrella of only after PR?

Salina: I feel very bad, yeah, I feel very bad.

My: Yes why?

Salina: Some of them, they are only here for PR so their main aim is not to complete their studies, nothing. They just want PR first. But it's not true [for all]. (Indian Student, Welfare Service, Private College, QLD)

These students' criticism once again refutes the overgeneralisation made by some teachers, employers and other members in the community that the only motive for international students studying VET in Australia is a pathway to permanent residency. This stereotypical assumption overlooks the range of purposes that underpin the student participants' investment in vocational education overseas. It is worthwhile reaffirming that the nexus between migration and learning, as Tran and Nyland (2011) explain, is confined to not only the sole intention to migrate but also to professional advancement, professional self-formation and dual objectives to secure migration and vocational skill advancement. When migration is perceived to be the motivation for the students' international education, it should not be understood simplistically as "only migration, no study" mind-set.

## Conclusion

This research shows that a mere 'PR hunter' is an unwanted and unjust transnational identity imposed on the international VET students participating in this study. Firstly, despite the fact that a group of international students see migration as the sole and ultimate goal of their overseas study, essentialising all international students as mere 'PR hunters' is unjust as this stigma might lead to adverse impact on the teaching of the whole international student cohort and on their integration into various aspects of the host country. It can provide an excuse for teachers and institutions to shy away from investing on improving the quality of education for this group. Research evidence indicates that even if international students are primarily driven by the desire to secure PR, it does not mean that they will be demotivated or poor students or workers. Nor does it mean that they deserve of poor treatment and low quality of education, notwithstanding the fact that using education as a stepping stone to PR is a legal pathway. Secondly, this stereotype fails to capture the diverse and nuanced identities and future aspirations of the international student participants as shown in this research. The desire for migration does not necessarily exclude the motivation to learn. The deficit ontological belief inflicts prejudicial restrictions on the student participants' ability to pursue their genuine endeavours and provokes negative emotions and perception towards the host community.

As teachers are involved in both institutional and work placement experiences of VET students, evidently teachers' role in shaping or shattering the stereotype against international VET students is critical. By highlighting the role of teachers in fostering or inhibiting international students' sense of connectedness, this research provides a deeper insight into the current discussion on the range of factors influencing international students' connectedness, particularly those related to the institutional contexts documented by Leask (2009). Teachers, specifically teachers' ontological beliefs about international students and their learning, exert a paramount impact on students' connectedness to learning and their opportunity to connect with the workplace and the outside community. Teachers' positive beliefs about students are able to bring out a positive influence on the students' educational experiences, ergo on their connectedness. Vice versa, teachers' biased perception of international students can impinge on their commitments to the students and adversely reshape their pedagogical approaches.

Institutions should not simply reproduce the social injustice already inscribed on international students in the workplace or in the community. In order to optimise international students' learning and foster their sense of belonging, it is crucial that VET teachers acknowledge the heterogeneity and complexity of the international student cohort, instil confidence and positiveness in their beliefs about the students' aspirations and motivations, and proactively exercise their agency in eliminating the unjust stereotype. Such positive changes in teachers' beliefs and attitudes depend on their personal dispositions, as well as on various experiential and educational conditions (Garmon, 2004) which are provided to help teachers foster their beliefs about diversity and their capacity to change social and cultural stereotypes. The

plethora of research in intercultural education of pre-service teachers, for example, has indicated the possible correlation between teacher candidates' engagement in these programs and the development of their multicultural awareness, knowledge and skills for teaching culturally diverse classrooms (Akiba, 2011; Capella-Santana, 2003; Downey & Cobbs, 2007; Pattnaik, 1997; Tran, Young & Di Lella, 1994). Of great significance are institutional commitments to providing well-structured, well-timed and well-thought programs conducive to teachers' beliefs and capacity to work with multicultural student cohorts and work towards changing cultural and racial stereotypes (Akiba, 2011; Breault, 1995; Lanas, 2014; Mills, 2008). In addition, institutions should provide accessible conditions to support international students in reporting and coping with stereotypical treatments, as well as to facilitate meaningful and inclusive engagement for all students on and off campus.

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*“I'm not like that, why treat me the same way?” Stereotyping international students as ‘migration hunters’ and its impact on their learning, employability and connectedness with the workplace*

**Abstract**

A significant body of literature on international education examines the experiences of international students in the host country. There is however a critical lack of empirical work that investigates the dynamic and complex positioning of international students within the current education-migration nexus that prevails international education in countries such as Australia, Canada and the UK. This paper addresses an important but under-researched area of the education-migration landscape by examining how the stereotyping of students as mere 'migration hunters' may impact their study and work experiences. It draws on a four-year research project funded by the Australian Research Council that includes more than 150 interviews and fieldwork in the Australian vocational education context. Positioning theory is used as a conceptual framework to analyse how generalising international students as 'mere migration hunters' has led to the disconnectedness, vulnerability and marginalization of the group of international students participating in this research.

**Introduction**

Transnational skill mobility and global competition for skilled human capital have accelerated over the past few decades. To address the current labour and skill shortages mainly due to ageing and fertility decline, recent policy efforts in countries such as Australia, Canada and the UK lean more towards retaining international student graduates from domestic universities rather than attracting migrants from off-shore (Gribble & Blackmore, 2012; Hawthorne, 2013; Robertson, 2011). This policy focus is driven by the common assumption about the advantage of international students as potential migrants based on their domestically relevant educational qualifications and skills, locally recognised credentials, familiarity with the host culture and host-country language ability (Hawthorne, 2013). In Australia, promoting the education-migration pathway has been perceived as the government win-win policy. This policy capitalises on the lucrative education export market as international education is the biggest service export industry generating 16.6 billion dollar for the national economy in 2014 (Hare, 2015). At the same time, the policy helps to attract and retain skilled locally trained human capital. This policy affects all education sectors including higher education (HE), vocational education and training (VET) and schools.

Around the world, there are approximately 4.5 million students pursuing overseas study (OECD, 2014). VET was the fastest growing sector in the number of international student enrolments in Australia between 2005 and 2009 and currently ranks second behind the HE sector, despite the turbulence caused by the collapse of a number of 'shonky' private colleges and changes to Australia's skilled migration

policy. There are at present 149,785 international student enrolled in VET (AEI, 2015). The period 2009-2010 witnessed a crisis to the VET sector as a number of VET private colleges actively marketed their courses as providing the pathway to migration rather than the study opportunity and did not invest in ensuring a quality education for international students (Marginson et al., 2010; Perkins, 2009; Tran, 2013). In 2010 the Australian government amended the General Skilled Migration Scheme in ways that restricted courses popular with many international VET students, emphasised high level qualifications, readjusted point allocation and required independent skills testing of graduates. Maximum priority is given to applicants with employer or regional sponsorship (DIAC, 2010). These policy changes have reduced the link between vocational education and permanent residency (Tran & Nyland, 2011). The Centre for Population and Urban Research's Immigration Overshoot Report (CPUR, 2012) indicates that between a half of and two thirds of international students returned to their countries of origin after graduation in 2011-2012 and the rest remained in Australia on temporary visa, further study visa, tourist visa or permanent residency visa.

The development of international education-migration pathway in VET over the past decade has been associated with a sweeping generalisation of international VET students as mere 'migration hunters' or 'PR hunters'<sup>1</sup> who do not have a genuine interest in learning and accordingly colleges are seen as 'migration factories' or 'PR factories' (Bass, 2006; Birrell et al. 2009; Birrell & Healy, 2010; Kinnaid, 2015). However, little is known about how such labelling has impacted international students' learning and connectedness with the workplace and the broader community. This paper aims to respond to this paucity in the literature by analysing the detrimental effects of the stereotyping of international students as mere 'migration hunters'.

This paper emerges from a research project funded by the Australian Research Council that examines the learning and engagement of international students within the migration-education nexus. The research includes more than 150 interviews with international students and teachers as well as fieldwork in 25 colleges in Australia. Using positioning theory as a conceptual framework, the research shows that for the international student participants in this research, a mere 'PR hunter' is an unwanted and unjust transnational identity imposed on them. This fails to recognise their career aspirations and multiple identities defined and redefined by their own subjectivity as well as their interaction with transnational social spaces.

This paper begins with a discussion of the research on the education-migration nexus that prevails international education in Australia. We then proceed to discuss the use of positioning theory as a conceptual framework and the research design. The subsequent section analyses the key themes emerging from the data including the effects of the generalisation of international students as 'PR hunters' on teaching and learning practices and student employability and connectedness with the workplace.

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<sup>1</sup> PR is the abbreviation of permanent residency commonly used in Australia

We conclude by addressing the implications for the institutional community to foster a more inclusive environment for international students.

### **International students in the education-migration pathway**

There is a significant body of research exploring the relationship between international education and migration (Baas, 2006; Birrell & Perry, 2009; Hawthorne, 2013; Robertson, 2011, 2013; Tang et al., 2014; Valentin, 2014). These include the nature and characteristics of the study-migration pathway (Hawthorne, 2013), international students' motivations for migration (Robertson, 2011, 2013), their future aspirations, and their career and migration trajectories in the country of education (Tang et al., 2014). Neilson (2009) points out the unintended consequences of the education-migration nexus including the changing demographics of students seeking PR, education providers' conscious provision or expansion of courses which are given advantage in PR pathways, and the adaptation of the marketing of courses to prospective students. **While VET pedagogy aims to promote equal opportunities and access for all students and the inclusion of diversity, the marketing of courses attached with PR advantages appears to be predominantly oriented towards students as migration hunters rather than education for all.** Robertson (2001, p.2207) argues that 'this all contributed to public backlash against migrants as undesirable subjects but also contrastingly against the system as exploitive. International students were thus simultaneously and contradictorily portrayed as opportunists and victims.'

The discourse around international VET positions international students as a needed and undesired group at the same time. There seems to be a contradictory positioning of international students in Australian nation-state from different actors: as a much valued group by the institution versus an unwanted marginalised group in the workplace/community. Even within the institutional discourse, there is a contradiction in institutional policy and pedagogic reality with regard to the positioning of international students. Institutional websites and policy documents represent them as valuable members with regards to both their cultural and consumer capitals. However, in reality, pedagogic practices mainly construct them as 'the other' and insufficient pedagogic investment has been made to capitalise on their cultural backgrounds and experiences to enrich the teaching and learning for all (Leask, 2009; Ryan, 2011; Tran & Nguyen, 2015; Tran, 2011). In the media and public discourse, international students are positioned mainly within the consumer frame and deficit model. For example, the recent ABC Four Corners episode's Degrees of Deception (2015) construct international students as no more than victims, cheaters or migration hunters. Nevertheless, Robertson (2011) rightly observes that Australia has not yet developed nuanced understandings of the international student experiences in the education-migration space. Thus this paper fills this gap in our existing knowledge by analysing how the international students who participated in this research position themselves and the impact of the social positioning on them within the education-migration nexus.

Constructing international students in VET, especially who study hospitality subjects as ‘PR hunters’, Birrell et al. (2009) claim international students are interested in investing in cookery courses as a step stone to migration. Subsequently, Birrell and Perry (2009) argue that since international students can potentially earn little if they return to work in developing countries with a VET cooking credential, their investment in Australian education must be to secure permanent residency. These authors maintain ‘the overseas students were prepared to pay for this instruction [cookery course], so it was alleged, because it led to a permanent residence (PR) visa’ (Birrell et al., 2009:63). These authors’ assumption lumps all international VET students into a homogenous group while ignoring the career aspirations and the genuine desire to return and work in their home country of a number of international students.

While works by Baas (2005, 2006) provide a useful account on the experiences of Indian students who use education as an entrance to permanent residency in Australia, it conveys the impression that the majority of Indian students, if not all, are PR hunters. In particular, the author emphasises permanent residence as a ‘form of compensation’ for an unsatisfactory education experience that Indian students are exposed to in Australia. In contrast, based on large scale empirical research with international students, Tran and Nyland’s (2011) study reveals the education-migration culture, into which many international students have immersed, to some extent, conditions and shapes their desire to migrate. Some international students did not have the original intention to migrate but their growing awareness of this migration-education nexus and their interaction with peers who are interested in migration influences their decision to apply for permanent residency. Tran and Nyland’s (2011) study further points out four main forms of the nexus between overseas study and migration. The first category includes students who are motivated to undertake international education with dual objectives to secure migration and to acquire the skills associated with their chosen occupation. The second one regards migration as a ‘second chance opportunity’, the third sees migration as the sole ultimate objective of overseas study and the fourth has lost the intention to migrate that they initially had (ibid., p.17).

### **Positioning theory as a conceptual framework to interpret the effects of stereotyping international students as mere PR hunters**

In this paper, Harré and van Langenhove’s (1999) positioning theory is used to analyse how international students self-position and are other-positioned by related actors as well as the conditions that shape these specific ways of positioning. Positioning theory focuses on identifying aspects of dominant discourse rules and conventions, rights, duties and obligations which are referred to as ‘the moral order’ in discursive practices (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). This theory is a useful conceptual tool to unpack students’ positions within the institutional structures and related communities, and how they perceive to be positioned in a specific ways (desirable or undesirable) by others in the discourse community. It allows an exploration of whether the subject in positioning accepts, accommodates or rejects dominant ways of constructing, viewing or making sense of a phenomenon and their

impacts. Harré et al. (2009, p.5) stress positioning theory is concerned with revealing the explicit and implicit patterns of reasoning that are realised in the ways that people act towards others.

Positioning theory indicates that when people engage in discourse as individuals or members of a group, they take up a certain position (Davies & Harré, 1990; van Langenhove & Harré, 1999). Hollway (1984, p.236) highlights 'discourses make available positions for subjects to take up. These positions are in relation to other people.' In this regard, conversations between individuals are statements of how things appear to the subject: the discursive construction of personal stories makes a person's actions intelligible and relatively determinate as social acts within which certain members of the conversation have specific locations. Viewed this way, international students, teachers, domestic/international peers and other members operating in the students' community are social actors whose ways of thinking and acting can be made intelligible by examining the ways they take up positions in conversations. In particular, Hollway (1984) indicates discourse is not limited to conversations amongst individuals as discourse can take place in the minds of individuals. Also, Harré and his colleagues (1999) argue that a distinctive feature of positioning as a social act is that positions are fluid, dynamic and open to challenge.

Positions are understood as clusters of rights, duties and obligations (Harré & Slocum, 2003). Hence, the ways students and teachers position themselves and each other are interrelated to their perceptions of their rights, duties and obligations within the moral order of the institutional context. Van Langenhove and Harré (1999, p.23) contend that 'the rights for self-positioning and other-positioning are unequally distributed and not all situations allow for or call for an intentional positioning of the participants.'

To interpret the impact of generalising international students as mere PR hunters, we use the following concepts of positioning: self-positioning, forced-self positioning, positioning of others and re-positioning. Self-positioning arises when a person takes on a particular stance and expresses his/her personal agency in order to achieve a particular goal in discursive practice (van Langenhove & Harré, 1999, p.24). This category is applied to interpret excerpts of interview data which are related to how students or teachers take up a specific position or stance when discussing the effect of the stereotyping on their practices. With regard to forced-self positioning, van Langenhove and Harré (1999, p.26) propose that it is different from deliberate self-positioning in that 'the initiative now lies with somebody else rather than the person involved.' In the case of this research, forced-self positioning is adopted to interpret how the students position themselves in the ways they think they are required or stereotyped by other actors. Other positioning is that one's intentional positioning of oneself in a certain way can lead to the positioning of someone else in the correlative position (van Langenhove & Harré, 1999). This category is used to interpret how students or teachers position other involved parties through the ways they express their own stance on an issue. Repositioning occurs when a person adopts a new position as a result of previous experiences and discussions. This concept is used to

interpret how the participants might shift their stance due to external influences, internal changes or previous experiences.

Adopting these frameworks of positioning theory, this paper focuses on the salient themes arising from international students' and teachers' views about the impacts of 'PR hunter' stereotypes on pedagogy, teachers' perspectives and students' connectedness with the classroom and host community.

## **Research Design**

This paper is derived from a four-year research project funded by the Australian Research Council through the Discovery scheme. The research aims to examine international VET students' learning and engagement experiences within host institutions as well as the broader community. It also examines teachers' views and adaptation of pedagogic work in teaching this cohort. The research draws on a qualitative approach. It includes interviews with more than 150 international students and staff and fieldwork conducted in dual-sector and VET institutions in three main states of Australia: New South Wales (NSW), Queensland (QLD) and Victoria (VIC).

After gaining the approval from the ethics committee at the University where the researchers were based, the student participants were selected based on the broad criteria that they are enrolled as an international student in either a public or private VET institute and they volunteer to participate in the research. The teachers selected for the research are those who are involved in teaching international students and are willing to participate in the research. International student and teacher participants were recruited through an invitation sent to the Director of International Program from their institute who helped circulate the invitation among their international students and teachers. Those who agreed to participate were asked to attend a face to face interview which lasted between 30 to 60 minutes. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. Second interviews were also undertaken with a small number of students who were willing to share with the chief investigator their experiences and changes as they progressed through the course during the first six months of their study. This paper focuses primarily on the semi-structured interview data with 105 international students and 50 staff members.

The key questions used in the interview with international students include: What are their purposes of undertaking the VET course? How do their purposes influence the way they learn? What do they think about the ways their teachers teach international students in VET? and Are there any stereotypes and generalisations that affect their learning and engagement in the community? For teachers, the primary lines of inquiry focus on how they perceive international students' purposes of investing in VET course, how these purposes might shape international students' learning and engagement and how they adapt their teaching to accommodate international students' study purposes and learning characteristics. The interview excerpts cited in this paper arose mainly from these questions.

A small number of excerpts which are typical of the data set were used in the paper due to the scope of the paper. The key themes on which this paper focuses and the relevant quotes were identified through a thorough process of coding using NVivo software, version 10. The researchers read the interview transcripts several times and utilised NVIVO software to categorise the interview data. The preliminary analysis was inductive and based on the themes and patterns that emerged from the coding. Then positioning theory (Harré and van Langenhove, 1999) is used to interpret the ways international students self-positioned and perceived how they were other-positioned by their teachers and other actors in the broader community to whom they relate. **Italics are used to highlight some parts of the interview excerpts that contain the key points conveyed by the participants.** To protect the confidentiality of the participants, their names and institutions are kept anonymous.

As explained in the above section, positioning theory (van Langenhove & Harré, 1999), especially its notions of right-duty, self-positioning, forced self-positioning and other-positioning are used to interpret the interview accounts. The discussion of the key findings in the next section uncovers uncomfortable realities about the adverse effects of the positioning of international students as those who see migration as the sole goal of overseas study on their learning and sense of belonging.

### ***‘PR hunter’ stereotype and effects on teaching practices***

Teachers’ commitments to students, commitments to teaching and their capacity to enhance students’ connectedness with learning and workplaces are essential for ensuring high quality educational practices. Yet, from the positioning of the students, teachers and support staff participating in this research, teachers’ fulfilment of these duties can be considerably undermined if their pedagogic practices are overridden by the stigma attached to international students as ‘mere PR hunters’. The following observations by the students in this study illuminate the repercussions of teachers’ other-positioning of international students as migration hunters on their classroom interactions with international students and on the students’ self-esteem:

I felt that my contribution is not valued. *That is because I am seen as someone who comes here to take something from the system, like a PR [permanent residency]. But I felt that they didn’t recognise that I want to be part of it and contribute something [Crying].... Or just treat it as if, you know, like you take no interest in the class or even in the people around you. That really makes me angry if I see that. But I feel I’m not like that, why treat me the same way [as those who are only interested in migration, not learning]? (Indian Student, Community welfare, Public College, VIC).*

There is a lot of stigma that you’re doing the TAFE [Technical and Further Education] course and getting residency. [...] on the very first day the Program Manager asked me, are you doing this for residency? [...] *it’s like putting a label on me already you want to see me as someone who is after PR.*

*I feel that there is a stigma attached to it as if these students come here and they do the course just for migration [...] If you [teachers] treat us with suspicion all the time and say, well you're not really interested in learning, you're just here for the visa, then there's no help offered to us in finding placements (Indian Student, Nursing, Public College, VIC)*

In line with positioning theory, *forced-self positioning* is related to how students position themselves in the ways they think they are essentialised or stereotyped by other actors (van Langenhove & Harré, 1999). The above excerpts show that the international student participants are forced-self positioned as migration hunters, and such positioning contradicts with the multiple aspirations attached to the learner status that they bring into the classroom. From these students' viewpoint, their teachers' other-positioning of international students is riddled with bias. The students from the above excerpts believe that their teachers do not position international students as genuine learners, opposite to how they position themselves with endeavours to be engaged in the educational process and to make contributions to the wider community. This is strongly expressed by the Indian student in the first interview excerpt. Both of the students' forced-self positioning conveys their disappointment and indignation when all international VET students are automatically labelled as PR hunters, and on this account, their genuine ambitions are ignored, their motivations for learning are questioned and their identity is affronted. The students' criticism is in line with Tran and Nyland's (2011) compelling empirical evidence which challenges claims made by researchers such as Birrell and Perry (2009) that the only motive of all international VET students is to chase after PR. According to Tran and Nyland (2011), migration can be among the multiple purposes of overseas study that individual students embrace, but this goal can complement their aspiration for learning and for career advancement rather than contradicts them. Furthermore, the two authors also assert permanent residency is not necessarily behind every international student's pursuit of VET as a number of international students undertake overseas education with bona fide desire to return and to work in their home country.

The teacher and support staff respondents also concur with the students' observations. They contend that the stereotype can undermine teachers' sense of responsibility and take its toll on the teacher-student reciprocal educational experiences:

*Yeah, unfortunately I think a lot of them [teachers] have given up. And so there's a lot of just pass them, just pass them, just pass them. I think there's significant latitude given to international students because they don't care and they are only interested in PR, the teacher doesn't really care... Why should I try to teach them in different ways if they don't care about learning anyway? So there seems to be a bit of a cease-fire where, well I'll teach the minimum requirements. So really what we've done is we've just slipped into mediocrity... And I think the teachers just said, you know what? What's the point? I'm still getting paid my hourly rate. I'll make it easier for everyone. So we see more multiple-choice questions. We see things that are easier to mark*

because hey, they don't care. Why should I care? (Teacher, Hospitality Management, Private College, VIC)

And some head teachers even been quite rude to students and turn students away and say do other course, why don't you do other course? That course is higher point than my course [childcare]. [...] Say things like "you may want to consider studying another course that is more suited to your goal of getting residency."... Well this student came to me and the counsellor advised her to see me, the student is really interested in studying childcare, and doing quite well. She's not the one that really just wants to get the residency or fill in the time. (Support Staff, Public College, NSW)

These interview excerpts lend support to the student participants' positioning of themselves and of the teachers. In a similar vein with the students' self-positioning discussed above, the support staff's other-positioning of international VET students recognises their genuine interest in the subject and the heterogeneity of learning motivations in this cohort of students, just like other cohorts of students. Nevertheless, according to both the teacher and support staff's other-positioning of the teachers, these attributes of international students are not always appreciated by all VET teaching staff. The teacher mentions three times in this brief interview excerpt that a group of teachers hold a strong view that "they [international students] don't care" about learning. The support staff respondent also indicates that the able and ardent student can be misjudged and mistreated by the teacher who misconstrues the student's interests and goals because of the PR hunter stereotype.

The adverse impact of this unjust perception inflicted on international VET students' learning can be substantial. As remarked by the teacher, a number of his colleagues have dropped their teaching motivations, expectations and sense of responsibility. These teachers are deemed to consciously adopt the PR-hunter other-positioning of the students as an excuse for becoming lenient and unconcerned with the students' learning, and unmotivated in improving teaching quality. The support officer's reflection on the head teachers' confronting attitude and treatment towards international students reveals another inimical influence of teachers' stereotypical belief. When teachers choose to tag a PR hunter label on every international VET student, they not only fail to perform their duty to shape and facilitate the students' connectedness with learning; they also become an institutional hurdle that disconnects the students with genuine motivation for learning.

These observations of teachers' other-positioning and their pedagogic practices resonate Nespor's (1987) influential work on the importance of teachers' beliefs on teachers' teaching practices. Beliefs, according to Nespor (1987, pp. 318-319), are constituted by "existential presumption[s]" which are strongly personal, affective, evaluative and can be different from reality. Although beliefs are not necessarily evidence based and reliable, they exert a powerful influence on the holders' behaviours and decisions (Nespor, 1987; Rokeach, 1968; Sigel, 1985). Teachers'

different types of beliefs, including those towards the learners, have been well recognised to be imperative to teachers' behaviours (Archer, 1999; Nespor, 1987; Pettit, 2011; Thompson, 1992). Perego and Boyle (1997, cited in Pettit, 2011, p.124) remark that in English language teaching, for example, if teachers hold unjustified deficit beliefs towards learners, even when the teachers are well-intentioned, discrimination might happen unconsciously. Given the conceptual parallel between teachers' ontological belief and teachers' other-positioning of learners in light of positioning theory (van Langenhove & Harré, 1999), theories about teachers' beliefs are helpful in shedding light on the research finding about the impingement of teachers' other-positioning of international students as PR hunters on their teaching practices and their commitments to the students.

The data, especially the statement 'What's the point? I'm still getting paid my hourly rate. I'll make it easier for everyone', reveals the structural conditions within which VET teachers work and the social context of the stereotyping. VET is facing the increasing casualised and intensified workforce aiming at cost reduction for VET institutes (Productivity Commission 2011). VET teachers generally work in precarious and vulnerable conditions. Within the private VET institutes, to which the first interview excerpt above refers, most teachers involved in teaching international students often work as casuals or on a short-term contract. Their job is not secure and their contract mainly depends on the presence international students in their program (Tran, 2013). According to Nakar (2013) and Guthrie (2010), sessional teachers, which account for increasing proportions of the VET workforce, have limited access to professional development and support including how to deal with the challenges arising from changing student demographics. Therefore, these sociological conditions bear on their attitudes to their work and their teaching of international students, making them not invest seriously in their teaching, easily accept some common stereotypes at the face value and adopt a 'let it go' attitude.

Other teachers indeed challenge the mind-set that if international students see migration as the sole aim for their overseas study and are not intrinsically motivated to learn, then there is no need for teachers to be concerned about the quality of teaching and learning:

My: And do you think a lot of trainers would feel disappointed if they see some of their students who are not engaged in learning and are only interested in PR?

Lian: I do, but I see that as an excuse. Because I can easily that myself, I could say look, I know you're only here for PR and why should I bother? But again, as I get back to the fact, I as a trainer of hospitality, it's my responsibility to basically give them all the benefits and demonstrate to them what the benefits are. If they choose to take that in, that's their issue not my issue. My issue is to be there as a trainer and *I think that if I take the attitude of oh, you're only here for PR, I'm not really concerned about you, well I'm not doing my job.* So I have a certain responsibility as a trainer to do that. Look, it is hard and it's frustrating to have students sit there that you know are

really not passionate about it but you have an obligation to the others that are.  
(Teacher, Hospitality Management, Private College, VIC)

In light of positioning theory, the teacher in this interview positions teachers/trainers as professionals who take cognizance of their responsibilities and maintain high integrity in delivering the “job.” She concedes that students with low or no candid interest in learning could be “hard and frustrating” hurdles to a teacher. Yet she dismisses justifications for the teacher’s failure to fulfill their obligation on this account. Teachers or trainers, according to her self-positioning, have no right to compromise the education quality. Regardless of international students’ purpose of investment in the course, it is obligatory for teachers to consistently enact their responsibility as a teacher to optimise students’ learning, not only due to their sense of professional duty, but more importantly, for the sake of those students who are genuinely keen to learn. The teacher also comments on her approach to cultivating students’ sense of belonging to learning by helping them gain understanding of the “benefits” of the subject, guiding them towards a positive perception and more nuanced understandings of the potential attached to the professional field that they are studying. Such pedagogic belief in fulfilling their self-perceived responsibilities is the manifestation of “their commitments to students and commitments to teaching” (Firestone & Rosenblum, 1988, p.288). According to Firestone and Rosenblum (1988), the synergy of these two dimensions of teachers’ commitments has important implications for teachers’ emotional care for students, high expectations for students’ achievements and pedagogical interest.

Akin to the teacher’s opinion, the student participants’ other-positioning of the teachers also indicates teachers’ duties to nurture students’ connectedness with learning:

And I think if you [teachers] want someone to genuinely do the course or genuinely be part of your community then it’s your job to help them do that. So maybe help them find a good placement, help them under systems, help them learn. [...] I think well if you [teachers] want, if you really want to train students then you have to be interested in teaching. It’s not just the student that has to be interested in learning with. It works both ways. (Indian Student, Nursing, Public College, VIC)

[T]he teachers can find more pathways to the workplace because cookery you've got to learn it from the industry, school is also important but you also have got to be in a good restaurant to learn all the good stuffs. There can be many levels of finding jobs, they can, at least, provide us a list of fine restaurants in the city or in the area around or at least they can give us with reference letter or something like that so that we can get it in our resume. And more for the counselling about the job and also the pay/wage. (Korean Student, Cookery, Public College, NSW)

Both of the interviewees identify teachers' important responsibility to support VET students to gain access to and to learn in work placements, which are considered an integral component of VET programs. This other-positioning of teachers' professional responsibility resonates with the dominant trend in the current VET teaching and learning practice that focuses on "closer engagement in work-based learning" (Hillier, 2009, p.6). It is also well reflected in previous discussions of VET teachers' roles, which typically include teachers' facilitation of students' 'empirical learning' in the workplace (Attwell, 1999, p.192).

The Indian student in the above interview excerpt broadly points out two essential aspects of teachers' responsibilities in fostering international students' sense of belonging. She first underlines teachers' transformative agency in cultivating students' genuine inquisitiveness about learning, and that in order to do so, it is imperative that teachers be motivated about their own teaching. In addition, she positions teachers as the bridge that makes international students more connected to learning, the workplace and the host community. The articulation of teachers' responsibility towards international students' broadest sense of connectedness as an educational outcome echoes Tran's and Nguyen's (2015, p.14) accentuation of "teaching as cosmopolitan work" that aims to foster students' meaningful engagement with "local and global diversity." Together with the teacher's self-positioning, the student participants' other-positioning of the teachers identifies the following responsibilities of VET teachers: teachers are duty bound to maintain integrity and commitment to their students and their teaching job so that they are able to nurture students' connectedness with learning and to foster their engagement with the workplace as well as the wider community.

***Impact on international students' employability and connectedness with the workplace: "[E]mployers don't want to employ us"***

Work-based learning or learning in the workplace has been recognised as an essential dimension of vocational education and training (Attwell, 1999; Hillier, 2009). Research evidence suggests that the practice of linking international students to workplace opportunities varies among different VET institutes (Tran, 2013). For some institutes, such responsibility resides with the teachers or international students themselves while for others, it is an institutional responsibility. Nevertheless, international students' vocational experience and their connectedness with the workplace are vulnerable to discrimination. International students are portrayed as 'an exploited invisible workforce' (Nyland et al, 2009). While this victimisation happens when the students are already employed, this research also shows that international VET students in this study are depicted as *an undesirable workforce* because of the PR-hunter stereotype:

Yeah, if you go for the job of some places, they think that Indians are just for the permanent residence. But not everyone is like that... employers don't want to employ us... Saying they are students but they just don't want to study and

develop the skills, they just want to get PR. If so many persons in the industry and the teachers also saying that Indian students are not attempting as hard as other nationalities. *There are some students, Indian students, who are not studying hard or they're just after the PR or the job. So but not everyone is the same.* (Indian Student, Cookery, Public College, QLD)

Some employers are scared. They're scared that if I employ this person, all they're really going to do is want me to sign them off for PR. Then as soon as I sign them off for PR, they're gone. And that has happened in some cases. He signs the paper one day and the person's gone the next day. Is it going to upset my customers if I have too many overseas workers? And that can happen. I've got an employer out there that says, 'I would like to take on a Vietnamese baker but my customers would not allow that. So that would affect my business so I can't choose to do that.' (Teacher, Bakery, Public College, VIC)

These interview excerpts enunciate how the PR hunter stereotype diminishes the opportunities for international VET students to be employed in an Australian workplace. In light of positioning theory, international students are often other-positioned by both local employers and teachers as opportunistic PR hunters who lack commitment, diligence and genuine aspirations to learn and develop professionally. The Indian cookery student's reflection mirrors Bass's (2005, 2006) observation that Indian students are pervasively viewed as PR schemers, which is disproved by the student's self-positioning. The teacher's other-positioning substantiates the reported adversity against international students' employability, adding that not only employers, but also the customers, are sceptical and discriminatory against international students.

This finding reveals that barriers to international students' participation in the local workplace are complicated and accumulate from more than one source. While employers' hesitation is evident, teachers' role in assisting their students and lifting the stigma appears to be missing. Based on the Indian student's other-positioning, teachers' discriminating judgments about Indian students exacerbate the prejudice against this ethnic group in the local industry. In the case of a Vietnamese bakery student who was turned down because of the customers' disapproval of foreign workers as reflected in the above excerpt, outright racism from the host community intensifies social impediment on international students' engagement in the local workplace. This multiplicity of obstacles stymies those international students' access to a meaningful vocational experience and impinges on the sense of belonging that international students in this research seek to build up with the host society.

The sociological context also shapes employers' attitude towards international students and explains employers' inclination to take a cautious approach to employing international students. Both the student's self-positioning and teachers' other-positioning of international students concede the fact that there are international students who deploy tactics to take advantage of local employers for their PR hunt. Reporting on the social conditions of employing international students, Tran's (2013)

research also found that some employers are reluctant to take international students because they had prior experience with international students who left the organisation right after getting the work experience certificate for migration purpose, which may cause disruption to the workplace. Employers' reluctance might stem from the assumption that international students may leave the country after their graduation (Patrick et al., 2008). Moreover, employers' uncertainty about international students' visa regulations and work right in the host country is another structural barrier to their acceptance of international students into the workplace. Another social condition that affects employers' attitude is the recent media reports on how international students have been discriminated against and exploited at the workplace, which makes employers cautious about being caught with potential troubles in employing international students (Tran, 2013).

However, as the student participant comments "not everyone is like that [...] not everyone is the same," it is unfair to project every international student with identical and predictable motivations and behaviours of migration hunters. Similar to this observation, other students in this study also express their frustration over the automatic assumption that international VET students are only after PR:

One day in the kitchen, one of the guys asked me what does Stacy really wants to do? I mean like do you think this is not the thing that I really want to do? He just assumes that I am doing this for PR and anything like that. [...] *So it's kind of frustrating to be seen in those kinds of standard that if you are not a resident, and you are studying cookery so you must be after PR. You must only for PR.* So it is kind of frustrating (Korean Student, Cookery, TAFE, NSW)

My: And what did you feel when people stereotype you and put you under the umbrella of only after PR?

Salina: I feel very bad, yeah, I feel very bad.

My: Yes why?

Salina: Some of them, they are only here for PR so their main aim is not to complete their studies, nothing. They just want PR first. But it's not true [for all]. (Indian Student, Welfare Service, Private College, QLD)

These students' criticism once again refutes the overgeneralisation made by some teachers, employers and other members in the community that the only motive for international students studying VET in Australia is a pathway to permanent residency. This stereotypical assumption overlooks the range of purposes that underpin the student participants' investment in vocational education overseas. It is worthwhile reaffirming that the nexus between migration and learning, as Tran and Nyland (2011) explain, is confined to not only the sole intention to migrate but also to professional advancement, professional self-formation and dual objectives to secure migration and vocational skill advancement. When migration is perceived to be the motivation for the students' international education, it should not be understood simplistically as "only migration, no study" mind-set.

## **Conclusion**

This research shows that a mere 'PR hunter' is an unwanted and unjust transnational identity imposed on the international VET students participating in this study. Firstly, despite the fact that a group of international students see migration as the sole and ultimate goal of their overseas study, essentialising all international students as mere 'PR hunters' is unjust as this stigma might lead to adverse impact on the teaching of the whole international student cohort and on their integration into various aspects of the host country. It can provide an excuse for teachers and institutions to shy away from investing on improving the quality of education for this group. Research evidence indicates that even if international students are primarily driven by the desire to secure PR, it does not mean that they will be demotivated or poor students or workers. Nor does it mean that they deserve of poor treatment and low quality of education, notwithstanding the fact that using education as a stepping stone to PR is a legal pathway. Secondly, this stereotype fails to capture the diverse and nuanced identities and future aspirations of the international student participants as shown in this research. The desire for migration does not necessarily exclude the motivation to learn. The deficit ontological belief inflicts prejudicial restrictions on the student participants' ability to pursue their genuine endeavours and provokes negative emotions and perception towards the host community.

As teachers are involved in both institutional and work placement experiences of VET students, evidently teachers' role in shaping or shattering the stereotype against international VET students is critical. By highlighting the role of teachers in fostering or inhibiting international students' sense of connectedness, this research provides a deeper insight into the current discussion on the range of factors influencing international students' connectedness, particularly those related to the institutional contexts documented by Leask (2009). Teachers, specifically teachers' ontological beliefs about international students and their learning, exert a paramount impact on students' connectedness to learning and their opportunity to connect with the workplace and the outside community. Teachers' positive beliefs about students are able to bring out a positive influence on the students' educational experiences, ergo on their connectedness. Vice versa, teachers' biased perception of international students can impinge on their commitments to the students and adversely reshape their pedagogical approaches.

Institutions should not simply reproduce the social injustice already inscribed on international students in the workplace or in the community. In order to optimise international students' learning and foster their sense of belonging, it is crucial that VET teachers acknowledge the heterogeneity and complexity of the international student cohort, instil confidence and positiveness in their beliefs about the students' aspirations and motivations, and proactively exercise their agency in eliminating the unjust stereotype. Such positive changes in teachers' beliefs and attitudes depend on their personal dispositions, as well as on various experiential and educational conditions (Garmon, 2004) which are provided to help teachers foster their beliefs about diversity and their capacity to change social and cultural stereotypes. The

plethora of research in intercultural education of pre-service teachers, for example, has indicated the possible correlation between teacher candidates' engagement in these programs and the development of their multicultural awareness, knowledge and skills for teaching culturally diverse classrooms (Akiba, 2011; Capella-Santana, 2003; Downey & Cobbs, 2007; Pattnaik, 1997; Tran, Young & Di Lella, 1994). Of great significance are institutional commitments to providing well-structured, well-timed and well-thought programs conducive to teachers' beliefs and capacity to work with multicultural student cohorts and work towards changing cultural and racial stereotypes (Akiba, 2011; Breault, 1995; Lanas, 2014; Mills, 2008). In addition, institutions should provide accessible conditions to support international students in reporting and coping with stereotypical treatments, as well as to facilitate meaningful and inclusive engagement for all students on and off campus.

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