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What do international students really want? An exploration of the content of international students' psychological contract in business education

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ABSTRACT

International students have a substantial presence in western business schools. Yet, research on international students' experiences remains sparse. Following recent calls to understand the international student–educational institution relationship, we examine the content, formation, and fulfilment of their psychological contract. We conduct a qualitative study of international students in two Australian business schools with large international student cohorts. The findings indicate that international students use social and institutional sources to create the contract, which, when fulfilled, leads to positive educational and psychological outcomes. Our research contributes to the business and international education literature by identifying the key content of the contract. We also highlight the interconnected roles of three tiers of the institution – academic staff, business school and university – in fulfilling the contract. Knowledge of international students' psychological contract will help business schools better manage the student–institution relationship and create a sustainable international student expansion strategy.

Introduction

International students have a large presence in western universities (Choudaha 2017). International students spend £14 billion in the UK, AU$20 billion in Australia and US$30.5 billion in the US per year (Dodd 2016; UK council of international student affairs 2014, 2015). UNESCO data suggest that about 23% of international students enrol in business schools (LeClair 2011), with the numbers rising to 38% in the UK (UK council of international student affairs 2015) and 60% in Australia (Australian Business Deans Council 2015). Seizing the opportunity for expansion, business schools now engage in recruitment via agents in international locations (e.g. China, India; Dodd 2016). Yet research on what students expect and how business schools can provide for them remains sparse.

A psychological contract, defined as the subjective sense of expectations and obligations in a relationship, provides a rich theoretical framework to understand student needs and expectations in higher education (e.g. Bordia, Hobman, et al. 2010; Koskina 2013; Wade-Benzoni, Rousseau, and Li 2006). Bordia, Bordia, and Restubog (2015) suggest that a positive socio-educational experience, by way of fulfilled psychological contracts, is important for the viability of international student recruitment.

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However, in order to provide a fulfilling experience, business schools must know the content of the psychological contract, including specific needs/expectations of international students; this will help business schools understand students' goals, why they have them and how they can achieve them. Ultimately, international students' satisfying experience is likely to include the perception that business schools understand students' goals and support students in attaining them.

In this paper, we investigate the content of international students' psychological contract (i.e. their needs/expectations), along with the antecedents and consequences of that content. Specifically, we interviewed international students on the content of their psychological contract, when and how that content was formed, sources that influenced its formation and what happens when that content is fulfilled or breached.

Our research makes several theoretical contributions. First, we provide empirical support for the theoretical assumptions regarding phases of international student psychological contracts (Bordia, Bordia, and Restubog 2015). Second, we present three broad sets of the content of international students' psychological contracts: educational, career development and socio-emotional. Knowledge of what international students want is the first building block towards providing them with a positive educational experience. Third, we highlight three levels of the institution that play important roles in contract fulfilment: academic staff, the business school and the university. Our research suggests that while students may expect different elements from each level, the fulfilment of these elements requires all three levels to work in an interconnected manner.

Finally, our research has practical implications for the recruitment and management of international students in business schools. Findings of the current research show that psychological contracts are partly formed based on information provided through educational agents and universities. Business schools can initiate active discussions with international students about their psychological contracts in order for both sides to understand the opportunities and challenges they face, thus creating a stronger business school–international student relationship. Our study also shows that the fulfilment of a psychological contract leads to a satisfying educational experience and enhances social and emotional well-being among international students. Satisfied students engage in positive word-of-mouth communication with prospective international students, thus creating channels for future recruitment of international students and reputational gain for the business school.

Theoretical perspectives

The psychological contract framework, originally developed for the organisational context, posits that individuals have a sense of reciprocity in a relationship, based on which they assess what they owe and what is owed to them (Rousseau 1995). Psychological contracts encapsulate needs, expectations and obligations in a relationship. The content of the contracts includes individuals' expectations and perceptions of mutual obligations (Rousseau 1995). Individuals create content based on several sources, including past experiences, social networks and promises from the organisation (Rousseau 1995). Breach, a subjective evaluation, occurs when individuals perceive the organisation to have not fulfilled its obligations (Morrison and Robinson 1997). Breach creates negative affective reactions leading to negative attitudes and behaviours (Zhao et al. 2007), including a feeling of violation, lower satisfaction, diminished performance, lack of trust and turnover (Bordia, Restubog, et al. 2010b, 2014; Bordia, Restubog, and Tang 2008; Restubog et al. 2015).

The limited but important student psychological contract literature suggests that students have similar psychological contracts with educational institutions. In business schools, Koskina (2013) points out, students have implicit and explicit expectations from the institution, the fulfilment of which lead to positive outcomes. Wade-Benzoni, Rousseau, and Li (2006) found that students in a research setting expected some research-related clarity from supervisors, including research goals and feedback. Fulfilment of psychological contracts led to higher well-being and satisfaction in research students (Bordia, Hobman, et al. 2010). Despite these insights, little is known about what international students want and how they create their psychological contracts.

In understanding the formation of psychological contracts, we invoke two additional theoretical perspectives: signalling theory and social informational processing theory. Signalling theory posits that individuals unfamiliar with an organisation interpret signals from the organisation to understand its nature and reputation (Suazo, Martínez, and Sandoval 2009). Organisational documents and promotional materials (e.g. websites, advertising, brochures) may signal certain promises. Social information processing theory suggests that individuals' expectations are shaped by information solicited from their social environments, peers, friends and family (Salancik and Pfeffer 1978). Communication regarding the organisational context based on experiences of social contacts shapes individuals' perception of organisational obligations.

In the context of international students in business education, we explore what sources of information are utilised by students to create a psychological contract. Do students seek information from the institutions they are likely to enrol in? Do they utilise informal sources of information such as friends or family? Do they consult other international students in the country of their chosen institution? Furthermore, we explore the specific elements of international students' psychological contracts. It is likely that international students' psychological contracts will contain educational elements. However, as international students enter a new culture, their psychological contracts may include elements that would help them adjust in their host country. Based on the psychological contract literature, we expect international students to react positively to a fulfilment of obligations and negatively to a breach of contract. However, we know little about the nature of this experience: for instance, what types of psychological contract elements are breached/fulfilled? How do students react to a breach or fulfilment? What outcomes ensue from a breach or fulfilment for the students and the institution? Therefore, in exploring the psychological contracts of international students in business education, we are guided by the following research questions:

Research Question 1: What sources contribute to the formation of the student psychological contract?

Research Question 2: What is the content of the student psychological contract (i.e. what are the perceived obligations of the institution)?

Research Question 3: What are the consequences of fulfilment and breach of the student psychological contract?

Method

Participants

Fifty-seven international students from two Australian business schools were interviewed. These business schools were chosen for their large international student cohorts. It is worth noting that the majority of international students in Australian business schools are post-graduate, male, and come from India and China. There were 29 participants from India; 9 from China; 3 from Bhutan; 2 each from Bangladesh, Indonesia, Singapore and Sri Lanka; and 1 each from Afghanistan, Cambodia, Chile, Germany, Japan, Korea, Malaysia and Vietnam. The majority of the participants were male (M = 47; F = 10) and post-graduate students (3 undergraduates), representing the overall make-up of international students in both business schools. There were 26 participants ranging in age from 25 to 30 years, 16 between 20 and 25 and 9 between 30 and 35. There were 2 students under the age of 20 and 4 over 35 years. Sixty-five per cent (37) of the participants had spent less than 1 year in their current institution, while 25% (14) had spent between 1 and 2 years and 7% (4) between 2 and 3 years; one student had spent more than three years. Participants were interviewed to elicit the sources that lead to psychological contract formation, content of contract, perceived fulfilment/breach of contract and their outcomes.

Procedure

Research assistants advertised the project in classrooms and approached students in common areas (cafeteria, library, etc.). Interested students were asked to contact members of the research group by

email or phone to set up times for interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted and included issues from the research questions. Participants were asked broad questions so as to not inhibit their views on the topic. A protocol was created for the interviews. Sample questions included 'How did you get to know about the university?'; 'What were your expectations when you enrolled in the university?'; 'Why did you have these expectations?'; 'What did you think of the university's facilities?'; 'Do you discuss the university and your expectations with your friends & relatives?' Research assistants conducting the interviews also asked follow-up questions to clarify information. All participants except four agreed to be recorded. The recorded interviews were transcribed. The interviewer took extensive notes for those interviews that were not audio-taped. The average time for interviews was 25 minutes.

Analysis

The data were analysed interpretively and iteratively to create themes (Miles and Huberman 1994). The analysis included three stages. In stage one, the raw data were coded to create a preliminary set of categories. For example, raw data describing participants' search for information about institutions were collated under categories titled 'information-gathering before enrolment' and 'information gathered during recruitment'. In stage two, the categories were interpreted at a theoretical level. Therefore, the two information-gathering themes were interpreted as 'sources that create psychological contracts'. In stage three, we attempted to thread the theoretical elements that emerged in stage two. Hence, we found broad support for the phases of international student psychological contract development and its outcomes (Bordia et al. 2015) while also finding specific details for the nature of sources in the development, specific content and nature of outcomes of the contract. The findings are presented below.

Findings

We present the findings of this research under four headings: sources influencing contract formation, content, breach/fulfilment and outcome of breach/fulfilment of psychological contracts for international students in business schools. All sections are illustrated with verbatim quotations (including grammatical anomalies from non-native English speakers).

Sources influencing psychological contract formation

This section presents the different sources from which international students formulated their perceptions of institutional obligations. Participant responses indicated two phases: *pre-enrolment* and *recruitment*. In the pre-enrolment phase, prospective international students gather information from two broad sources: *educational institutions* and students' *social network*. Based on their previous domestic or overseas experience, students framed institutional obligations from their prospective institution (' … in India, when you go to any administration staff, they don't talk about this assignment paper, the room numbers, no. [Here] They talked us', I18, India). Students also sought information from their social network, including friends, family and other students who had experiences with business schools in Australia ('I had a couple of friends who had studied back in Australia … they told me it's very interesting and it is not theoretical at all, it's totally practical and you are going to learn a lot. So that's what I was looking forward to after coming here', I6, India). Collectively, prior educational experience and information from students' social network influenced their understanding of institutional commitments towards them.

During the recruitment phase, participants developed their perceptions of institutional obligations based on *active promises* from agents and university representatives at educational recruitment events in their home countries on a variety of topics, including educational facilities,

financial arrangements, visas and initial adjustment processes ('When the University representatives went to New Delhi, India. So I met them face-to-face. It was a really good university, which my counsellor told me … . So they told me is one of the best Accounting, for accounting courses, it is one of the best universities in Australia', I36, India). Such information helped students develop perceptions about the institution. Some of these perceptions had to do with the quality and reputation of the business school, the nature of the degree programmes, details of the educational content and pedagogy, the quality of teaching and academic staff members, monetary arrangements to be made prior to enrolment, the types of support services and availability of additional support from the institution.

Prospective students also engaged in the evaluation of signals provided by institutional brochures, websites and newspapers advertisements. Information gathered from the above-mentioned sources was the precursor for the development of psychological contracts. Using signalling theory, we further analysed the types of signals that contributed to the content of the psychological contract. We found that signals from institutions created perceptions of obligations in the minds of prospective international students. Some of these obligations may have been expected, as they were clearly tied to the signals (e.g. details of degrees, financial costs). However, other obligations were subjectively interpreted by prospective students from those signals. Two types of signals were visible: reputational and infrastructural.

International students made their choices based on the reputation of the university and relevant schools. One student stated, 'The reason why I applied for [name of university], my expectation is because this university is a very prestigious university, high-ranking in the world and also in Australia' (I14, Malaysia). Another participant discussed his assumptions about the quality of academic staff based on the reputation of the school:

> the ranking of the [university] is obviously one of the top universities in Australia. So actually the ranking itself does not tell me much. But I believe if a school has a high ranking, so there must be good teacher and student involved in the university. So it means I can have better training from a high ranked school. (I4, Vietnam)

In addition, a student suggested that a well-presented website indicated a well-organised programme of education ('Well when I initially enrolled in this university I checked things from the website. It was really [a] glamour[ous] one, very nice, everything looks like very much organised' (I32, India).

Students received information regarding computing facilities from the institution's website and from communications with agents representing the university. One participant was later disappointed to learn that students were only allotted a limited number of hours to use the Internet ('I searched some web pages of university and my counsellor told me … they will have very good computer facilities', I36, India). Perhaps the information regarding good computer laboratories signalled the availability of generous hours of Internet allocation to this student, as the same student later went on to say ' … I am really frustrated about that computer quota' (I36, India). Students also compared their institution with other similar institutions. Facilities provided by other institutions signalled perceptions of obligation from the current institution. One student stated, 'I don't know much about other universities but they are providing [sports and recreational facilities] currently, but in ours they are not providing like that' (I38, India).

It is likely that the information gathered in the pre-enrolment phase provided the background in terms of understanding the information collected during the recruitment phase. Participants may have had a generalised psychological contract in the pre-enrolment phase, but much of the detailed development of the psychological contract actually occurred during the recruitment phase. In terms of Research Question 1, the participants in this study revealed that their psychological contracts were formed from information gathered from sources such as friends, family and other students; prior experiences in similar institutions; agents and university representatives; and formal institutional communication via websites, brochures and advertisements.

Content of psychological contracts

This section examines the content of international students' perception of obligations from the educational institution. Participants stated that the institution was obligated to provide educational facilities that adhered to high standards in terms of content and quality of teaching ('So from this MBA, I am thinking of expecting to take some knowledge which I can really use it and I go to the depth of it', I3, Bhutan). An appropriate selection of courses (' … they are obligated to give me a good selection of relevant course work', I1, Indonesia), support for individualised learning ('I thought it would be more consultative between the students and between lecturers, a lot more discussion', I9, Singapore) and applicability of the degree in the workplace ('I would like to learn more theories about business and management, to merge it together with my practice, before, so that I will have a better understanding of management and work in the future', I2, China) were also expected by the international students.

Students also needed some assistance with the development of their future careers and expected the business school to help with part-time or casual jobs while they studied ('they should provide more assistance relating [to] casual jobs', I40, India). Students saw the business school as responsible for networking and internship opportunities in relevant industries ('[My expectations are to] build a network in the area that I want to work for and work in', I4, Vietnam; 'Networking is one really important thing for MBA studies, but the school doesn't really, they don't have anyone who's really into this and there is no such thing officially. So this should be something the school could do about, like the alumni', I2, China). In addition, providing career opportunities by way of internships or interviews was included as part of psychological contracts (' … so I think it's the university's sort of obligation to provide more help because at least I think like it's quite difficult to find a job if you are not [a] resident here', I10, China).

Students expected to receive certain services that would lead to a better educational and social environment for them. Appropriate support services such as Internet access ('I had an expectation that they at least will provide us an internet facility', I38, India); academic skills training (' … when I was in [another school at the university], and I enjoyed the service there [writing skill training classes], so I expect that the [business school] should have the same service offered to its students', I4, Vietnam); infrastructure conducive to learning and assessments (' … last time when we had our foundation on finance quiz, we had only chairs, no table. In the total room there are supposed to be five tables but two tables were taken out and we had to sit on the chair, take our book and then it was really uncomfortable doing quiz on. That's basic facilities which we expect from a business school where we pay like thousands of dollars for fees', I21, Bhutan); sports and recreational facilities ('we should have a playground, because we are still students, we love to play cricket', I39, India) and a multi-cultural social environment (' … you know it's an international environment. So have a lot of people from other countries were you can interact', I45, India) were seen by participants as institutional obligations.

Other services that would create a better environment for international students included assistance with accommodation searches (' … some people are getting the very cheap rate rent, some people are getting the most expensive places … so if they [institution] are co-ordinated … given those information they [students] may have get a good accommodation', I46, Sri Lanka) and monetary assistance in the form of scholarships (' … if you have 10 Chinese students, 5 like Indonesian students and you give all the five Indonesian students scholarships and only one or two to the 10 Chinese students, then it's not kind of balance … they should increase the proportion among Chinese students of applying scholarships and provide more for a large proportion', I2, China). Students also expected the institution to provide them with reduced-price books and other educational accessories (' … don't expect them to consider everything, but they should consider some things, like books should be not so expensive', I37, India). Free Internet services came up as a recurrent obligation in this category. Students commented on the need for unlimited Internet access for social ('[name of university] should provide more of internet facilities for students because you see there are many overseas students who are coming here so they need to get in touch with their parents and I

think the easiest way is the email', I44, India) and educational ('when you expect all the students to check through your learning resources … when you have to search everything … so internet should be free', I51, India) reasons. To summarise, in terms of Research Question 2, international students' psychological contracts are likely to include a range of elements pertaining to education, career and socio-emotional issues.

Fulfilment and breach of psychological contracts

This section presents the responses regarding participants' perceptions of (un)met institutional promises. We first present fulfilment and then breach. Participants stated that they found that the academic standards met their expectations ('I had expectations that I am going to learn lot of things which I think pretty much fair, no complaints about that', I33, India). The administrative and academic staff were helpful (' … the staffs were very approachable, I remember one incident where it was like my first semester … so it's a total different culture for me and coping with all the courses and all … I had this difficulty in submitting an assignment … but the lecturer was really, really good, kind enough, he understood my things … ' I3, Bhutan; 'Whenever you go to them, like handing assignments with administration office they're quite nice and efficient. They will help you when you have troubles like late submission, they will tell you what to do', I2, China), and the infrastructure and support services of institutions were conducive to learning ('Library facilities I think really good', I44, India). Finally, participants perceived the institutions as appreciative of multiculturalism ('I am getting so many different cultured students over here. I am mixing with them and making friends', I47, India).

Students are likely to react more strongly to breach of content in a psychological contract based on the particular content's relative importance to them. Therefore, a breach of some important content, such as a free Internet quota, may lead to significant negative feelings because of its relative importance in maintaining contact with friends and family in other countries to avoid a sense of social isolation. Such feelings are reflected in the following participant's comment:

> I am an international student, I have to talk to my parents, I have to chat to them, I have to read their messages … There should be some provision for international student. We have provided $24000 for two years, what they are doing? They cannot provide us free internet access? (I36, India)

Others stated that some academic staff fell short of their expectations ('I find that there is sort of quite big variation in terms of teaching quality', I10, China). Some students also felt that domestic and international students did not interact with each other ('Although we are studying in Australia, actually I don't know too much Australian friends! Because my classmates were really busy. After class they just disappear and we don't have time to talk, to chat, it's like … yeah you don't know much local people. This is kind of strange and kind of pitiful', I2, China). Still others were frustrated with class timing ('If you are a part-time student you will have classes in the evening … but if you are a full-time student I think you, you expect classes in the afternoon, in the morning', I8, Chile).

Outcomes of fulfilment and breach

We first discuss the outcomes of fulfilment, followed by those of breach. An interesting feature in this study was that participants rarely dwelled too long on obligations that had been fulfilled ('And then regarding classes I am satisfied, that like we are having class three hours altogether, its fine, but we need more interaction like with the university … ', I42, India). Breach, however, elicited more reaction. The organisational literature also suggests that obligations that are fulfilled may sometimes go unnoticed (Morrison and Robinson 1997).

Outcomes of fulfilment
Some of the outcomes of fulfilment of psychological contracts included satisfaction with educational content and teaching, support services, state-of-the-art technology, orientation programmes and the

university's general environment ('They have the staff from Academic Learning Centre teach you how to write essay, teach you how to reference things … we were informed when we were in our country … so we expected that, and they fulfilled it … It helped me a lot', I22, Cambodia). One participant expressed relief that his expectation of developing a social network in a new cultural context was fulfilled ('I made great friends from other countries, which you know, I had a doubt, you know that as to how I will be able to interact with them, but the coordinators and the student mentors were very helpful, you know and we just got along really good', I45, India). Although not perceived as an initial obligation, a participant was pleasantly surprised at the security provided by the university in taking students back home after office hours (' … the security here is more better than what I expected. They are twenty-four hours and they are sending back home after six [pm] … . because it is late, yeah that's a very good one, where I came from it's not … you [take] transport by yourself. Yeah, that I never expected, but that's very good', I52, Malaysia).

Interestingly, one respondent who experienced fulfilment also stated clearly that it was the institution's obligation to meet these perceptions:

> I find everything good enough till now. Because the faculties are really good, they are helping me, the learning connection [a unit made up of academic and psychological counsellors], everything given for the referencing thing, the assignments, the research book is really good, the data … IT system is more advanced than our, my country. So it's good enough, like I am getting used to the more IT system. I am getting knowledge under university, our professor, like our program director, everyone is very helpful. They are helping us for the accommodation … *but still I know the university should provide all these things.* (I47, India)

Participants also expressed a sense of priority in terms of fulfilment of certain elements in psychological contracts ('I find that the classes are done in a professional manner. There is nothing lacking there, which is the most important thing', I48, India).

Outcomes of breach

Some were frustrated with the allotment of hours of Internet access, while others were disappointed with the lack of assistance in part-time job searches ('I feel frustrated because they told me that we cannot do anything, you have to adjust in this [internet] quota', I36, India; 'Initially I was feeling really down … because I didn't get any help from the University to get a job', I30, India). Participants reacted negatively if there was any increase in tuition fees ('It was horrible because I knew my parents can't raise that much money all of a sudden', I33, India). Another interesting aspect of this breach was that it was based on comparisons with the fee structure of other globally reputed universities, as the same participant said

> … if I compare with my recent tuition fee I am about to pay, it's like nearly about paying Oxford University, so I was thinking like I should go to some better place, because this is a place like middle of nowhere. (I33, India)

One participant stated that breach led to lower performance and ultimately resulted in negative word-of-mouth communication to others ('I was really frustrated [about the course content] from the beginning and that had an impact on my performance'; ' … Well the effect it can have is you are not happy with it. And once you are not happy … that can have a bad effect in the sense of word-of-mouth', I7, Bhutan).

Breach of psychological contracts led to negative emotional outcomes, and some participants stated that they felt they were not valued by the university ('Do they care for me? It's all about care of a student. Do they care for me or are they just taking sacks of money and then, done', I18, India). Participants spoke of the violation of specific elements of the contract. For example, one participant reported disappointment at the inability to secure accommodation ('Over the last three semesters I've applied every semester but never got the result, I don't know why … that's very disappointing', I2, China). The Internet quota restriction created feelings of frustration ('It takes five minutes to download- piss me off!', I18, India). The negative affective outcomes of breach are consistent with meta-analytic results in the workplace context (Zhao et al. 2007).

Therefore, in terms of Research Question 3, participant responses revealed that fulfilment of psychological contracts impacted student satisfaction positively and enhanced a sense of well-being. Breach, however, led to feelings of violation and to a diminished sense of well-being. Next, we discuss our findings in terms of their theoretical and practical implications.

Discussion

Business schools benefit from international students in two main ways. First, international students create significant revenue for business schools. For example, international students in Australian business schools spend AU$5.3 billion per year, and they pay fees that are 20% higher than domestic students (Australian Business Deans Council 2015). The international student cohort worldwide is set to rise to 3.8 million by 2024, with Indian and Chinese students contributing 35% of that growth, with the USA, the UK and Australia remaining as popular destinations (MacGregor 2013). Such increased revenue is often impossible in domestic markets given limited population growth. Second, a core activity of business schools is to prepare their students for a globalised workplace where individuals from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds are expected to work together. International students allow business schools to build a diverse environment within an educational context, thus providing the opportunity for all students to develop a global mind-set, one that is invaluable in the contemporary workplace. However, such advantages come with greater responsibilities towards the well-being of international students. One way of fulfilling such responsibilities is by engaging with international student psychological contracts. Given the nascent state of research on international students in business education, little is known about student needs and expectations. Knowledge of what international students want is at the heart of creating a successful and sustainable international student–business school relationship.

We synthesise the findings of the current research to present three dimensions of the international student psychological contract: educational, career-development and socio-emotional (Table 1). For each category, we present the likely sources of contract formation. We then discuss the content of the contract in terms of short- and long-term expectations. The short- and long-term presentation of the content is of relevance because business schools can initiate a discussion of some of the short-term elements of the content (e.g. selection of courses, accommodations) before the student commits to the institution or soon after arrival at the institution. This is likely to create a more realistic

Table 1. Content of international student psychological contract (PC).

	Educational content		Career development content		Socio-emotional content	
Short term	Element of PC: Selection of courses Effective teaching Internet quota	Source of fulfilment/ breach: Business school Individual academics University	Element of PC: Part-time jobs	Source of fulfilment/ breach: Both university and business school	Element of PC: Accommodation Internet quota Sports and recreational facilities Scholarship Multi-cultural environment	Source of fulfilment/ breach: University University University University and business school University and business school
Long term	Element of PC: Education standards that facilitate future careers	Source of fulfilment/ breach: Business school	Element of PC: Industry placement upon completion of degree	Source of fulfilment/ breach: Business school	Element of PC: Scholarship Multi-cultural environment	Source of fulfilment/ breach: University and business school University and business school

psychological contract that can be fulfilled and to provide a positive experience to students at a time that is most uncertain for them (just prior to, and upon, arrival). The long-term elements of the content may be shaped by the fulfilment/breach of the short-term elements. The long-term elements are pivotal to the overall success of the international student experience (e.g. educational experience, industry placement) and are likely to have a lasting effect on individuals well after their student experience is over. Some elements are both short and long term because of the ongoing nature of the relevance of these elements (e.g. scholarship). Elements may appear in more than one category, as students may expect them for more than one reason (e.g. Internet quota for education and social reasons).

We also suggest the structural level of the institution that is likely to be responsible for fulfilment/breach: academic staff, business school and the university. Our classification of organisational levels is primarily based on our understanding of the Australian university and business school structures (in consultation with some key administrators) along with some mention of the organisational levels in the data. Our research illustrates that some elements require all three levels to collaborate in order to provide students with a fulfilling experience. Finally, we present the outcome of fulfilment/breach for each category.

Educational features

Students formed the initial educational content of their psychological contract based on educational institutions at home or in other international locations. These elements were then corroborated during the recruitment phase with active promises from university representatives, agents and evaluation of signals from the institution. In the short term, international students may expect an adequate selection of courses and advice on course selection. They may also expect effective teaching, including advice on assessments, as well as adequate internet access to conduct research for assessments. International students may hold the university (for internet quotas), the business school (for course selection) and academics (for effective teaching) responsible for the fulfilment of the short-term educational elements.

In the long term, international students may expect a good standard of education that will help them with their career goals. This element of the psychological contract is likely to be directed both at the university and the business school, as status and institutional ranking at both levels are likely to convey educational standards to prospective employers. Fulfilment of both short- and long-term educational elements led to a satisfying educational experience, while breach resulted in feelings of frustration with the institution. Educational performance was negatively impacted, and in extreme cases, this led to termination of the degree.

Career development features

International students often sacrifice work and career opportunities in their home countries in order to study in the host country. The financial requirements of studying in a foreign country necessitate the consideration of short- and long-term career options in the host country. Students formed some initial career-related content of their psychological contracts from communication with their social network in the pre-enrolment phase, followed by discussions with institutional representatives in the recruitment phase. In the short term, students may expect the business school and the university to provide them with advice on part-time jobs, including career counselling on job applications, potential employers, minimum wage and taxation-related requirements.

In the long term, international students may expect business schools to advance their employment opportunities through alumni and industry engagement. In some countries (e.g. India), business schools organise industry interviews on campus for the graduating cohort. Students from such countries may expect similar services in other business schools. In addition, networking opportunities with alumni is an important aspect of many MBA programmes, and students may have

specific expectations of meeting prospective employers in such events organised by the business school. The fulfilment of career development content led to a positive psychological experience, while breach had a negative impact on well-being.

Socio-emotional features

This category had the most varied elements of psychological contracts regarding services with the potential to create a positive socio-emotional environment for students. The socio-emotional content was formed during the pre-enrolment and recruitment phases. Both institutional and social sources influenced this content. Most elements related to services from the institutions, the fulfilment of which was likely to create a better social and emotional environment in which international students could thrive. In the short term, international students expect the university and the business school to provide them with appropriate accommodations, an Internet quota, recreational facilities, a multi-cultural environment and information on scholarships. While accommodations and sports and recreational facilities have the potential to be both short- and long-term elements, it is likely that as international students become familiar with the city, they will be able to avail themselves of these facilities. Therefore, these elements may be more important in the short term than in the long term.

However, some elements such as scholarships and a multi-cultural environment may be ongoing in nature. Scholarships not only provide a short-term financial respite but also allow prospective employers to judge the educational standard of the student in comparison to peers. Therefore, scholarships are likely to be a long-term element of a psychological contract. In terms of multi-cultural environments, when international students come to the host country for the first time, a multi-cultural environment allows them to feel culturally safe. International students learn about the new culture from individuals who have acculturated shortly before their arrival. In the long term, a multi-cultural environment helps international students maintain contact with their original culture, thus facilitating re-entry into their home culture upon graduation. Both the university and the business school are likely to be responsible for the fulfilment of these elements. Fulfilment of socio-emotional features led to enhanced well-being, while breach impacted well-being negatively. Below we present the theoretical and practical contributions of the paper.

Theoretical contributions

The psychological contract approach provided us with a theoretical lens through which to investigate international students' needs, expectations and perceptions of institutional obligations, along with its antecedents and consequences. The success of the business school–international student relationship depends on the business school knowing what international students expect from them. While psychological contract theory has been applied before in terms of an empirical investigation in the educational setting (Bordia, Hobman, et al. 2010; Koskina 2013; Wade-Benzoni, Rousseau, and Li 2006), to the best of our knowledge, this is the first empirical paper to focus on international students. Koskina (2013) suggests that students have a combination of transactional, relational and ideological elements in their psychological contracts. Our research extends this line of inquiry by theorising about the content categories of international students' psychological contracts. We highlight three categories of content that international students are likely to expect from business schools: educational, career development and socio-emotional. We identify the short- and long-term nature of the content, the fulfilment of which can lead to short- and long-term outcomes. We present the institutional levels that are responsible for the fulfilment of the content. Our findings suggest that the majority of the responsibility falls on the business school and its academics, with some responsibility falling on the university. Given that most of the content of psychological contracts is geared towards the business school, and that international students are likely to spend more time there, it is possible that these students will also hold the business school responsible if

university-related expectations are not met and may expect the business school to lobby the university on their behalf for better conditions.

Furthermore, our research highlights the interconnectedness in sharing responsibilities towards international students from three tiers in an educational institution. In Figure 1, we show how the three tiers – academic staff, the business school and the university – are interconnected in terms of their responsibilities towards contract fulfilment. The data suggest that the academic staff are responsible for providing effective teaching. However, effective teaching is related to effective course selection and the presence of appropriate educational standards for course entry, both of which are the responsibility of the business school. Moreover, effective teaching is linked with effective learning on the part of the student, which is likely to occur if the student has the ability to conduct effective literature reviews via adequate computer and Internet access, which is a university-level responsibility. Part-time jobs, industry placements and scholarships are likely to be responsibilities shared by the business school and the university because all three are dependent on the reputation, ranking and overall standards of both the business school and the university. Accommodation, sports and recreational activities, and a multi-cultural environment, all university responsibilities, are likely to affect a student's well-being, which in turn will impact his or her educational achievements. Therefore, the success of an individual student's learning and psychological contract fulfilment, academic staff's teaching, as well as business schools' and universities' reputation are interconnected and are likely to affect each other.

Our research is linked to several important areas of higher education research. Choudaha (2017) documents historic trends of international students and suggests that institutions currently recruit international students in a bid to innovate. In terms of institutional benefits, we believe that
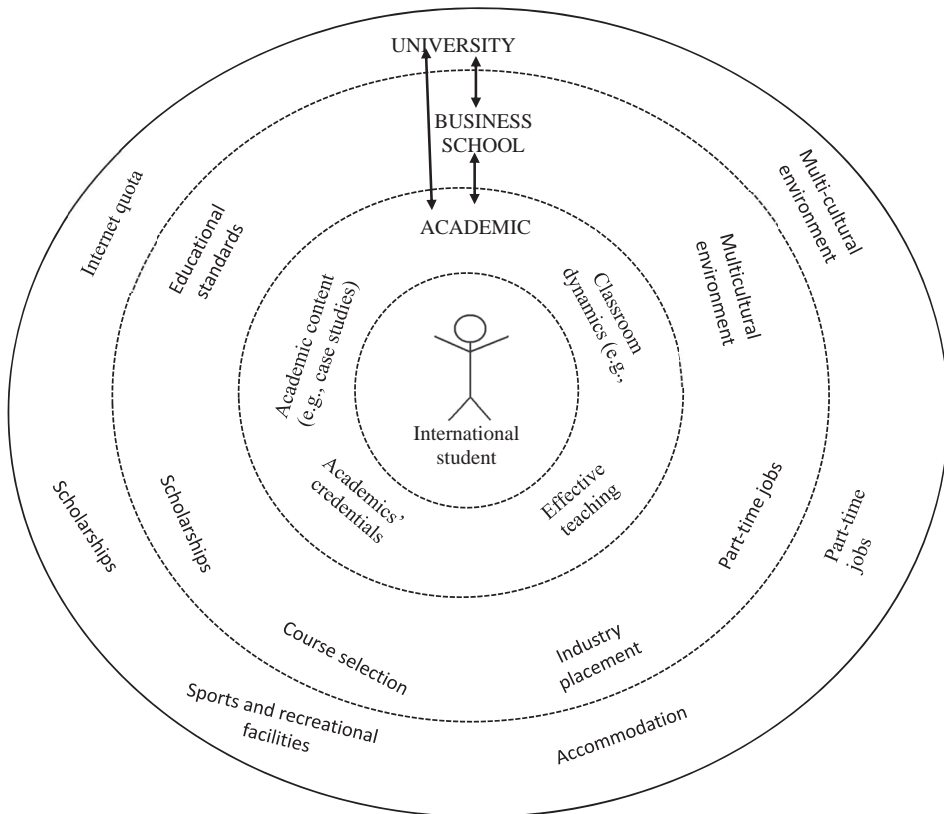

Figure 1. Interconnected nature of responsibilities towards international students.

international students help business schools innovate financially and also by internationalising the institution. In terms of benefits for international students, Zhou et al. (2008) present several strategies for international student adaptation. Our research suggests that business schools can facilitate adaptation by heeding the content of psychological contracts. The fulfilment of educational, career and socio-emotional needs of international students leads to a satisfying experience. Finally, in terms of the physical and psychological safety of international students, Brown and Jones (2013) suggest that racism towards international students is likely to bring disrepute to universities and hinder the local economy. In this line of thinking, we present a wide spectrum of international students' needs and expectations, the breach of which is likely to stunt business schools' ability to recruit and to reduce their financial and reputational gains.

Our research suggests that psychological contract formation and status (i.e. fulfilment/breach) are not static, one-time events. Psychological contracts are formed and evaluated throughout the educational journey. Students begin with a preliminary contract, which is tempered by social and institutional comparisons, to form a more lasting psychological contract. International students also prioritise elements of their contract, and the fulfilment/breach of some elements has more of an effect on them psychologically and educationally than do others. The psychological contract literature has broadly assumed that all breaches of contract have a similar magnitude of effect. Our research presents a more nuanced picture in terms of the effects of fulfilment/breach.

Practical contributions

This study has several practical implications for business schools. Effective management of student psychological contracts will provide international students with a positive learning experience, a sense of well-being and a positive social environment. Knowledge of international students' psychological contracts can help educational providers create marketing and recruitment materials so as to generate realistic perceptions of institutional promises. If agents working on behalf of business schools are provided with, and are able to disseminate, accurate information about the business school, students are likely to build realistic psychological contracts, hence ensuring fulfilment.

Business schools can demonstrate an interest in international students' perceptions by inviting them to contribute to ongoing discussions about their needs/expectations. This will help create a positive reputation for the institution as one that is caring towards its international students. In the current environment, where students have many business schools to choose from, a nurturing reputation may indeed be eye-catching for prospective students.

Limitations and further research directions

The main limitation of this research is that it is based on cross-sectional data. Future longitudinal investigation can examine how and when international students modify their psychological contracts. Recent research suggests that employees actively repair psychological contracts damaged by breach (Bankins 2015), and international students may do the same. International students are not a homogenous group and come from different cultural, educational, social and economic backgrounds (Bordia, Bordia, and Restubog 2015). Business schools also differ based on national and cultural contexts. Our data had a large percentage of Indian students, and therefore, the content of the contract may be germane to the context. However, we wish to emphasise that the sources of contract formation, broad content categories and outcome of fulfilment/breach are likely to remain relevant even if the specific content of the contract changes.

Conclusion

There has been an unprecedented growth of international students in recent times, and the numbers are forecasted to increase. Western-based business education has become a globalised commodity

desired by citizens of several countries. With this immense opportunity for business schools comes the responsibility of providing international students with the best possible educational, social and psychological experience. International students make several commitments towards the business school by way of finances and socio-educational adjustments. Business schools can reciprocate by understanding international students' expectations and nurturing their students academically, socially and psychologically. We do not wish to suggest that all expectations must be met. However, an open dialogue will help students modify their psychological contracts towards a realistic and attainable one, ultimately leading to a satisfying experience.

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