International Student Engagement in Higher Education: Transforming Practices, Pedagogies and Participation is about international student engagement and its relationship to transformation in higher education. Engagement is currently a highly valued and much vaunted concept in university mission statements and teaching and learning policies. This book explicates the complex institutional, social and psychological factors that coalesce in the engagement of international students with academic practices in a foreign university. At a time when student mobility is growing and participation in overseas study programmes is increasing (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2014), diversity and change are the norm in higher education. Indeed, diversity is considered to be one of the defining features of the 21st century (Green et al., 2011). Development in global capitalist societies has been marked by increases in diversity, pluralism and differences in communities, as well as increased interrelations between communities (Reich, 2011). The ensuing issue for policy designers, decision makers and citizens is the paradox of addressing sameness and difference in ways that ensure democratic participation, equity of opportunity and recognition within community.

In higher education, the prevailing conditions require university policymakers, administrators and teachers to have an understanding of diversity and to know how to respond ethically and educationally to the diversifying cultures, languages, ethnicities and races characterising the student population. A persistent conundrum permeating university policy and research, especially in Anglophone contexts, is how to reconcile sameness and difference, or put another way, majority culture with minority culture. That is, how to move from a focus on interactions between cultures, with one dominant and more powerful, to the embracing of possibilities that arise from a new transculture which is generated through mutual dialogue and respect (Ryan, 2011). New nationalisms are putting this question under pressure: Brexit in the UK; anti-migrant protests in Germany; unyielding border control measures and the rise of Islamophobia in Australia. Yet, economic pressures mean that universities and higher education systems continue to pursue greater enrolments of overseas students. In Australia,
international education has its own federal government portfolio with the minister celebrating a significant increase in 2015 student numbers and a promise to ‘facilitate further growth’ in the sector (Colbeck, 2016).

In the face of this growing diversity in university classrooms, the questions remain about valued knowledge, relevance of learning and responsive teaching approaches. For example, should dominant Western forms of scientific knowledge, understandings and skills be valued over other forms in the academy? Is it the role of all students to comply with academically mandated expectations? If so, to what end? What, if any, are the benefits? How can university teachers reconcile universally mandated, standardised curricula and assessment with diverse student capabilities and experiences?

These questions align with many of the debates in the higher education literature. In the Australian context – the most internationalised higher education system in the world (OECD, 2013a) – internationalisation has been highly marketised with the use of vigorous recruitment strategies for over four decades. It is an approach that is mirrored in other English-speaking countries and is increasingly being adopted by universities in non-native English-speaking environments such as Denmark. Despite the longevity of the internationalisation project, questions continue to be asked across the world about teaching for diversity and inclusion in universities, especially for students from different cultural backgrounds and using English as a second/additional language (ESL/EAL) (e.g. Bailey, 2013; Brew, 2007; Foster, 2012; Kettle & Luke, 2013; Lee & Rice, 2007; Marginson et al., 2010).

Ryan (e.g. 2000, 2005, 2011, 2013) has worked extensively in the area of teaching and learning for international students in higher education. She notes that the increasing mobility and enrolment of overseas students mean that they are no longer a minority group in some courses. Yet, debates persist about internationalisation and whether teaching approaches have moved on given that many of the complaints of teachers continue to echo those from past decades (e.g. Singh, 2009, in Ryan, 2013). Ryan applauds these debates and argues that more work needs to be done in developing creative approaches to teaching, learning and assessment that address ethical issues such as the role of English and the dominance of Western knowledge systems and intellectual traditions. She maintains that much still needs to be done to convince many university lecturers to change their teaching approaches to the new imperatives around international students. Instead, many academics adopt a type of academic imperialism that casts their role as educating students simply in ‘our ways’ (Ryan, 2011). Initiatives in the field must bring these academics on board and assist them to teach in ways that enrich the learning and cross-cultural experiences of both local and international students. This book responds to the call
of researchers such as Ryan and presents exemplars of teaching that were
deemed by international students to be highly beneficial to their learning,
scholarship and participation in the new academic culture.

The Field

The international student literature emerges in three discernible
themes that resonate with other fields such as migrant ESL education
(Kettle & Luke, 2013). Initial Australian research on overseas students in
universities during the 1980s and early 1990s adopted a classic diagnosis/
remediation approach to non-native English-speaking students entering
the Australian tertiary model, particularly in relation to English language
proficiency and approaches to learning. This approach was rejected in the
1990s and superseded by ‘culturalised’ understandings that highlighted
culturally differentiated learning approaches and transitions. Later in the
2000s, influenced by ascendant critical and post-structural perspectives in
sociology, research shifted away from the deficiencies and adaptations of
international students to power and the power structures of the university.
Researchers were interested in how particular practices came to dominate
in the institution and how they co-opted students implicitly and explicitly
into ways of knowing, doing and being.

A recent example of this approach is the book by Chowdhury and
Phan (2014), Desiring TESOL and International Education: Market Abuse
and Exploitation. In the book, the authors argue that English and teaching
English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) have exercised power
to create certain identities for international TESOL students that serve
the interests of hyper-marketised higher education systems especially in
English-speaking countries such as Australia. The focus of the book is
the institutional and larger global mechanisms that have commodified
TESOL into a desirable and taken-for-granted good, and the ways that
international TESOL students resist or acquiesce to these discourses. The
book offers a critique of the neo-liberal forces that have exploited TESOL
in the highly competitive global market for international students. Indeed,
the authors claim that the language of the market is so prevalent in talking
about international students that they have become an economic object in
the discourse of higher education.

The successive ‘waves’ of literature on international students canvassed
above represent a historical continuum of research perspectives; each
identifiable body of work represents a reaction to its predecessor with
the deployment of a different set of theoretical tools to explain similar
phenomena. This process is not surprising given the understanding that
new knowledge is generated through problematising and critiquing existing
knowledge (for more on the production of scientific knowledge, see the
debate between Popper and Kuhn, e.g. Rowbottom, 2011). *International Student Engagement in Higher Education: Transforming Practices, Pedagogies and Participation* aims to build on the critique of Chowdhury and Phan and other insights from previous research to move the field towards engagement as an explanation of the international student experience. Engagement as it is proposed here involves the dynamic, ongoing, reflexive efforts of international students to mediate institutional expectations in their everyday experiences.

International student engagement, then, is practice. By focusing on engagement, the focus is the student as she/he negotiates the practices of the new academic context. The student is positioned as the expert on engagement. This centring of the student and her/his practice of engagement is an important new direction in understanding the international student experience of teaching and learning in a foreign university. Interestingly, it aligns with Ryan’s (2011) point that international students are often neglected in discourses of internationalisation in higher education. She argues that this position is illogical given that international students are one of the most effective sources of intercultural knowledge and understanding. In the same way, the argument in this book is that the best place to investigate the conditions, actions and achievements of international student engagement is the students themselves. While critical positions might decry the economic objectification of the international student, this book foregrounds lived experience and the students as the embodiment of engagement. The orientation asserts the primacy of the international student who within higher education practices and literature as well as the popular media has been variously marginalised and maligned. If the Chowdhury and Phan work focuses on international student objectification, this book foregrounds student action.

The conceptual framework proposed here is critical in that it investigates power relations but is innovative in its priority to explicate positive practices, that is, exemplars of higher education teaching practices that international students appraised as helpful and affirming. The theoretical orientation is to productive power and the ways that institutional power structures can be exploited by both students and teachers to achieve personal and pedagogical ends. Rather than positioning the students as dupes in need of a preordained programme of ‘Truth’ (Freebody, 2003), this book privileges their voices, experiences and actions. The argument is that at a time when interest in engagement is escalating, the best way for institutions to learn about international student engagement is by listening to the students themselves.

The student accounts of engagement are explained through a theory of social practice in conjunction with work on engagement. The objective is to present a comprehensive theorisation that encapsulates and explicates
all aspects of what is a complex construct. A necessary condition of explaining complexity is a repertoire of theoretical resources that can be pragmatically gathered together for explanatory purposes. A feature of this book is a re-examination of debates that have traditionally isolated different research approaches from each other, for example, psychological approaches to learning from sociocultural ones. The focus is synthesis and commensurability between perspectives that can be productively combined to explain international student engagement, especially given the elusiveness of engagement as a concept in the current literature.

The Genesis

The genesis of the book lies in my personal experience as an international student in Germany and an academic English teacher in Australia. As an English teacher in academic preparation programmes at an Australian university, my job was to teach literacy and oracy skills to undergraduate and postgraduate international students, both before commencement of their studies and during their first semester. I was privy to troubling accounts from the students about their experiences in mainstream programmes. In one instance, a group of Master of Business Administration (MBA) students told me about a group case-study project in which they were pointedly excluded from decision-making roles by their Australian peers. The latter distributed the tasks and commandeered the key roles for themselves. A pattern began emerging when an international student enrolled in an undergraduate media studies course recounted a similar experience on a survey I conducted with the class:

I found that a group project was a bit hard for us, because Austudents want to do everything perfect and they wouldn’t let us do things, except very easy works like typing.

During my seven years as an English language teacher in Australia, it was not uncommon to hear comments from teachers and academics essentialising the behaviours of ‘Asian’ students. As I read more, I realised these utterances, while appearing in disparate contexts, formed a theme that was pervasive and coherent; it was a discourse characterising ‘Asian’ students as quiet and non-participatory. And it was not benign – this discourse had material effects in shaping teachers’ views and influencing their teaching practices. Not that the students were unaware of what was happening. The MBA students in my academic English class recognised their marginalisation and actively sought to redress their situation. The students seemed to draw strength and validation from our class discussions, which resembled what Canagarajah (1997: 7) called a ‘safe house’, that is, ‘a
parallel but safe site’ where the students could ‘respond to, reflect on, and comment about classroom concerns’. I was struck by the tension between the agency of the students and the disempowering discourses at work in other parts of their university experience. Equally, I was aware of my mediatory role and the affordances it provided for collective reflection and action. It was this tension between structure, agency and mediation that set the grounds for the case study of international student engagement and, ultimately, this book.

The students’ stories of marginalisation resonated with aspects of my own experience as a foreign student in Germany. My studies were conducted at the Universität München, Ludwig-Maximilians Universität during the 1980s and 1990s, and were mainly language focused. While my German host family was generous and welcoming, it was difficult to establish contact with local students, an experience that I attributed to my non-native, intermediate-level German. My friends were the other international students with whom I used German as a lingua franca. Back in Australia, the MBA students also blamed their difficulties on language. Language is our major semiotic resource for self-representation. Operating in a moderately proficient second language (L2) leaves the user exposed to misrepresentation and misunderstanding. This is a highly visceral experience for many international students and is an important consideration in this book.

**The Book**

*International Student Engagement in Higher Education: Transforming Practices, Pedagogies and Participation* draws on a research project conducted with six international students enrolled in a Master of Education programme at a large metropolitan university in Australia. Most of the students were in their first semester and using English as their second or third language. The research investigated the new ways of knowing, doing and being that the students recognised as valued in the Western academy and their strategic actions to engage with these institutional expectations. For the students, these actions were the grounded in their personal and academic goals for achievement and personal accomplishment. In addition, the book utilises the students’ views on excellence in teaching to highlight classroom practices that facilitated their learning and participation. The students’ accounts are triangulated with university policy documents and microethnographic analyses of videoed classroom interactions to build a comprehensive evidence-based explanation of international student engagement as it is lived and negotiated across a period of study. That the students were postgraduates links to the growing interest in postgraduate and doctoral levels of study by international students and the increasing number of international enrolments in Australian postgraduate courses
(Australian Government, 2015a). The students in the case study were from Argentina, China, Mozambique, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam, while the lecturer was a senior academic with a reputation for excellence in teaching and reform in minority education.

Engagement, like practice, is a concept that is used in multiple ways and has what Fairclough (2001b) calls ‘felicitous ambiguity’; that is, it has multiple meanings that refer to both action and entity. Engagement then is doing something as well as a thing in its own right – either achieved or aspirational. It can also reference the antecedents for engagement, that is, the conditions that make student engagement possible. These might be institutional or personal. The argument proposed here is that engagement is a productive way of investigating international students’ efforts to mediate institutional expectations through their immediate actions and interactions, driven by goals of appropriation and enactment and larger professional and personal motivations. The mediation of structure and agency inherent in this understanding of engagement invites the invocation of theories of social life, particularly those prioritising social practice (e.g. Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Foucault, 1996d). The position of this book is that engagement and social practice can be usefully drawn together to provide an explanatory model of international student engagement in higher education.

Social practices involve particular configurations of elements such as actions, interactions, objects, values, expectations and language that are dialectically related and responsive to change. By recognising student engagement as academically situated social practice, new understandings are created about the elements that students recognise as salient in the practices of the foreign academy and the actions that they take in response. Furthermore, the outcomes of their actions are made visible in the analysis. By focusing on practices, students are positioned as the arbiters of the international experience with the authoritative voice on what matters. This approach affords insights not only into the students’ actions but also their interpretations of what works in the university to assist academic transitions. Of particular interest are the pedagogies that the students find effective in promoting their learning and participation in course practices.

For the students in this book, international higher education is an investment in professional development, cultural and linguistic know-how, and improved credentialing; it is also an opportunity to imagine and pursue a new life. There is an aesthetic dimension to the overseas study experience whereby austerity and sacrifice are embraced as part of a larger programme of personal transformation. International study is not only the path to improved financial and professional prospects; it is also a significant personal undertaking absorbing extensive energy and resources.
The detail provided through the research in this book will be of interest to institutional policymakers and researchers attempting to understand the international student experience. Of note will be the conditions, processes and outcomes of engagement, in particular what is working institutionally to assist students and what is not. Equally, the comprehensive analysis of teaching, classroom interaction and assessment will be useful for higher education teachers interested in expanding their pedagogical repertoires to accommodate student diversity and change. The contribution of the book is threefold: (i) it presents a model of international student engagement; (ii) it extends existing research to practice-orientated understandings of engagement as a means of capturing the complexity of the international student experience; and (iii) it highlights in micro-analytic detail the features of classroom teaching interactions that international students found exemplary. The insights afforded by the research have benefits for university personnel as well as researchers at a time of increasing cultural and linguistic diversity within the student population.

The book has nine chapters including this Preface. Chapter 1 provides contextualisation and the global and national trends associated with international higher education. Chapter 2 examines the myriad representations of international students reflecting the changing zeitgeist on difference and diversity in higher education from the 1980s. Chapter 3 presents a theory of engagement drawing together existing work on engagement and understandings of social practice and student agency. Chapter 4 ‘pictures’ the university and the ways that internationalisation is being realised in university spaces and places. It also introduces the international students in the study and the lives they craft for themselves in the overseas context. Chapters 5 through 7 present the salient features of engagement as identified by the students themselves: what counts as English in the English-speaking Western academy; what is effective university teaching and how does it facilitate learning and participation; how do international students resource their academic, social and linguistic transitions; in what ways are students transforming their lives and impacting institutional practices? Chapter 8 concludes the book with a synthesis of the issues raised about international student engagement and the implications for student rights, institutional responsibilities and the transformation of higher education.