

Sustaining the Higher Education Hub Model: The Challenge of Adequate Academic and Social Support Structures for International Students

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, the Education Hub (EH) concept has perhaps become the single most important focus of higher education policy in most Asian countries. A particular Asian Education Hub model (e.g. Cheng, 2010) is now globally influential with its emphasis on how governments can harness direct as well as indirect economic benefits of a higher education system. Such a model aims to prepare students for employment in an emerging global economy and also to attract fee-paying international students in terms of education as not just a public good but a key and increasingly important area of national investment and economic development. In a related paper which focused on a comparison between distinct Malaysian and Singaporean versions of Asian EH models developed over the last two decades (Richards, 2011c), we investigated the dangers as well as opportunities at stake. In this paper, we investigate the linked idea that sufficient academic and social support structures for supporting international as well as local students provide the crucial key to the factors of sustainability needed to support the various versions of the general strategy of Higher Education internationalisation.

Keywords: higher education internationalisation, Asian Education Hub model, international students, higher education academic and social support structures

Introduction

Certainly Malaysia has the competitive edge in one or two aspects but more effort is needed to compete in a high challenging contest to be the higher education hub... to strengthen the comparative advantage, Malaysia needs to focus on the important aspects of higher education – quality assurance, accreditation, research capability, opportunity for scholastic development, availability of scholarship and research grants – which are all important factors for foreign students (Wan, Kaur & Jantan, 2008).

As exemplified by Singapore, Cheng's (2010) analysis of an Asian Education Hub (EH) model as a strategy of national investment and economic development may be summarised as follows: the optimal application of this model is a national (or even city-state) 'brokerage' which imports quality brands, courses and other education services from 'stronger systems' and then sets up a market to attract international students from 'weaker systems'. In this way significant knowledge surplus and commercial profit can be achieved simultaneously. This might be constructed as a 'new credentialism'. Nearly all the formal or projected versions of the Asian EH model by different nations seem to assume that an influx of overseas campuses from quality institutions, transnational programs and visiting international academics would help ensure the success of national investment on the one hand and, on the other, promote cross-cultural dialogue and knowledge exchange. In practice it is not always so simple. For instance, although international student mobility and academic exchange programs are often assumed to be the keys to dramatic mutual benefits, unless there are proactive efforts to provide academic and social support for engagement or integration many international students and staff may suffer from cultural isolation and academic exchange disillusionment (Guilfoyle, 2006; Reece, 2010).

At the core of the Asian EH model is the generic strategy adopted by different governments to attract projected numbers of international students, particularly fee paying postgraduates (Sugimara, 2008; Yoshino, 2010). Yet, as discussed below, non-completion rates for postgraduate research students around the world are generally so high that unless better support is provided the Education Hub dreams of many nations are at risk in the long-term. Some Western countries seem to have remained a preferred destination for 'international student mobility' markets despite relatively high effective rates of failure and anecdotal evidence of significant levels of degrees of dissatisfaction commonly experienced in relation to the academic and social support structures typically provided by universities around the world (e.g. Wakefield, 2003). The reason for this perhaps lies in motivation and attractions such as access to the West, native English-speaking countries, opportunities for work and migration which would not so

readily apply to many of the proposed Asian hubs . In short, if the Asian EH model is to become a sustainable vision then it will need to address the global problem of PhD completion rates and associated challenges of adequate support in relation to additional challenges linked to local contexts. In other words, this is a challenge that invites change and innovation where Asian higher education systems have the opportunity to provide real global leadership consistent with the aspirations of rhetoric and policy.

The particular dilemmas of the global postgraduate research market: A key to future sustainability?

Around the world, the institutional and wider national incompleteness rates of postgraduate research students (PhD candidates in particular) are not often discussed. Even in the competitive higher education sectors of the US, UK and Australia, these rates are generally high for local students and often higher for international students. Lovitts (2009) has linked anecdotal and formal evidence to conclude that a lack of appropriate academic support, not academic ability per se, is often the cause of PhD incompleteness or failure and institutional and national rates of incompleteness which sometimes surpass 50%. A major recent study of US universities confirmed that attrition rates for PhDs tend to range from 30 to 50% for the sciences and between 40 and 70% for the social sciences and humanities (Council of Graduate Schools, 2009). These variations have much to do with fundamental differences in methodology and the fact that sciences tend to be more ‘highly structured’ and therefore receive more ‘academic and social support’. Although the US study did not particularly focus on or at least recognise significant differences for international students, a similar UK study did so (Corbyn, 2007). It found that at some institutions a lack of adequate support often translated into very substantial (up to 80% or so) attrition rates for international students.

Malaysia has recognised the importance of the postgraduate research market for its Hub aspirations. As discussed in a previous paper (Richards, 2011b), it has targeted an ‘annual’ cohort figure of 200,000 international students by 2020 with an emphasis on quality international research students (Lim, 2011).

Likewise other Asian EH model proponents similarly project an optimistic harnessing of expanding international student mobility (Verbik, 2007). At the beginning of 2011 Malaysia has more than 85,000 international students including a growing number of postgraduate research students. This compares with a little over 100,000 international students in Singapore. Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, China and other Asian countries. EH model proponents are typically offering significant number of postgraduate research scholarships to kick-start not just international student numbers but also policies which view higher education as the 'engine growth' of future national investment and economic development.

Various national EH policies in Asia refer to targets for 'international student' numbers. Yet the constant emphasis on attracting quality postgraduate research students suggests that there is general recognition that this particular group is the key to sustainability. This assumption has been reinforced by the experience of the Australian higher education sector in recent years. It has been reported that the crisis of a significant drop in international students numbers has not significantly impacted the quality end of Australian higher education internationalisation (Cook, 2010) including the quality postgraduate research market. This crisis was partly due to the global financial crisis and the rising value of the Australian dollar and a range of quality assurance dilemmas and issues focused on both 'lower end' institutions and students beyond the scope of the discussion here (Wesley, 2009). In all these respects, it was a warning of some of the risks and dangers of a top-down EH model (Ziguras, 2009). In light of this crisis there has been a renewed interest in Australia in formalising the direct provision of international students with better assistance in terms of both academic and social support and genuine assurances of a 'deep' commitment to quality of education (Walters, 2011). Therefore, the Australian example is particularly instructive for discussing the sustainability of the Asian EH model.

It is clear that many international students are attracted by issues of *affordability* and others by the promise of exemplary *infrastructure and facilities*, for instance to undertake advanced science and technology research. Whether it is the obvious affordability of studying in Malaysia or the ostensible

infrastructure and facility advantages of Singapore, all international and local research students rightfully expect a sustainable ‘quality of education’ and value for the cost of their study and accreditation. In all the talk about higher education internationalisation, the concept of adequate quality assurance is often discussed but rarely clarified. University international rankings are often referred to as a guarantee of quality. However, even the organisations which undertake such ranking exercises concede that they do not evaluate the quality of teaching and learning in particular universities, nations or cultures, nor do they necessarily gauge the quality of ‘academic culture’ . In this way, it is possible (and more common than many would think) for particular universities to have a strong reputation for research but a poor or at least unconvincing reputation for teaching and learning (e.g. Lewis, 2006).

As we have seen above in terms of the definition of the Asian EH model, education is seen as not only a *marketable commodity* but as basically *transferable content*. Such influential notions imply that quality is merely a function of either reputation or infrastructure, facilities and resources. This is a particular issue in Asian countries where neo-Confucian models continue to resist, challenge or even undermine the general policy imperative of most Asian governments to adopt new, more critical and innovative models of learning (i.e. the constructivist or learner-centred models of project-based learning, inquiry-based learning, problem-based learning and so on) which are ideally suited for producing graduates with the range of generic skills valued by the global economy in general and by private employers in particular (Richards, 2010). Even in those countries which have formal quality assurance frameworks these often involve selective indicators and ad hoc standards increasingly open to question in changing times and in comparative contexts. Thus, in many of the same countries which now aspire to Education Hub status there has been limited commitment to address related ‘cultural change’ issues required for more effective policy implementation and sustainability. This is illustrated in even the more educationally ‘progressive’ Asian countries such as Singapore and Hong Kong by the continued adherence to traditional exam-based and rote learning models of assessment which are at odds with national education imperatives and policies (Mok & Tan, 2004; Garrett, 2005; Chan & Ng, 2008; Hoofd; 2010).

In other words, a distinction needs to be made between *deep* and *surface* notions of the ‘quality of education’ – a macro-micro distinction which might cut across academic and social cultural differences (e.g. Ramsden, 1998). The related concept of ‘deep learning’ is linked to both strategies and processes which go below surface level content and skills to achieve more effective and transferable understanding in different contexts. Academic staff should model the reflective practice and innovative knowledge building that are expected of quality graduates prepared for a changing world (e.g. Light & Cox, 2001; Laurillard, 2002). This should apply to all modes and levels of learning but especially to professional academic degrees and those preparing or ‘educating’ postgraduate research students. This should apply to local college and university foundations of national higher education systems and to the provision of teaching, learning and academic culture for all those international students targeted by specific EH models in Asia and elsewhere. In this way, we propose to point out that the sustainability of the EH model - wherever it might be applied – might be based on concentrated and effective efforts to enhance academic and social support structures for students.

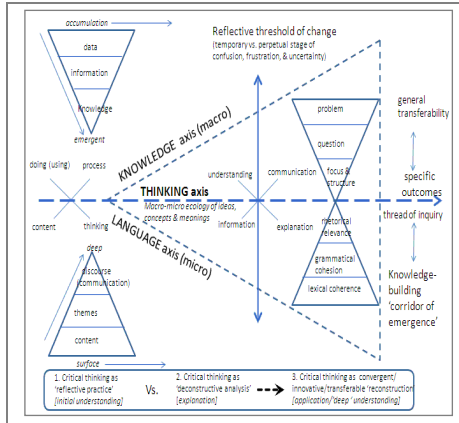
The challenge of adequate academic and social support structures for international students.

The challenges of adequate academic and social support structures are global for higher education (Reece, 2010). Yet they represent the central challenge to the Asian EH Hub model in several ways (e.g. Al-Zubaidi & Richards, 2010). Rather than being seen as fixed and inevitable obstacles to the sustainability of this model, we propose that the challenge of achieving adequate academic and social support structures for international students also represents an opportunity for Asian higher education sectors to provide global leadership. Many Western universities and their national higher education sectors have shown a general disinterest in providing better support for their PhD students (e.g. Corbyn, 2007). This is in part because of entrenched views that such students should be allowed to ‘sink or swim’ (Mullins & Kiley, 2002, Lovitts, 2009). Such views perhaps reflect residual perceptions and attitudes

from the past. In a fast-changing world, there are new opportunities for developing national higher education sectors and universities to become more relevant and responsive to the needs of society, to the opportunities of privatisation and marketisation and to ‘public good’ imperatives at the heart of various national and international challenges. But this will require a renewed commitment to deep, not just ad hoc and superficial notions of educational quality, especially where international postgraduate research students are concerned.

Few would disagree that the general concept of ‘deep learning’ – the basis for achieving greater understanding, applied innovations, and transferability of knowledge - should be at the heart of all higher education policy initiatives and reforms. The related idea of a ‘deep quality of education’ may be represented in terms of how the *macro* aspects of ideas, concepts, and models interact with the *micro* details of skills, information and content to inform an ecology of understanding and explanation grounded in practice not just in theory. In such ways, the most effective learning and knowledge building generally form ‘emergent corridors’ which frame the most productive outcomes. Just as problems, questions and project designs are the essential pillars of *active learning* (i.e. it may be argued that problem-based learning, inquiry-based learning and project-based are the common three key pillars of both a learner-centred approach to teaching and constructivist theory of learning), so too they inform the kinds of ‘threads of inquiry’ which might optimise the pursuit or development of a PhD inquiry or academic project. Figure 1 below outlines an integrated model of how students might be assisted to use critical thinking to optimally develop the process of knowledge building in terms of an emergent corridor of inquiry, problem-solving and project development. Such a model might be applied to various notions of capacity-building and policy implementation (Richards, 2011b).

Figure 1: The key aspects of an integrated and optimal model of academic learning and knowledge-building



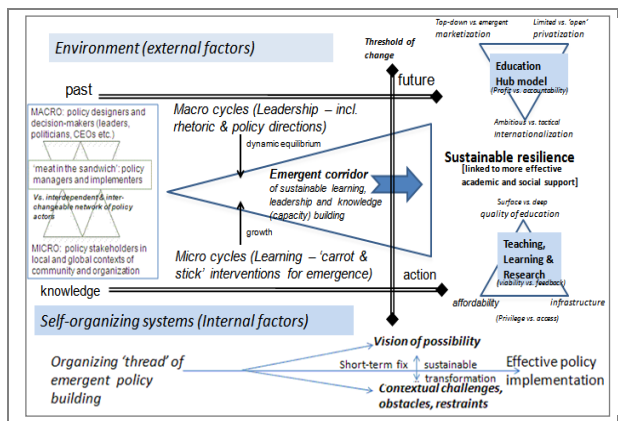
Adapted from Richards, 2011c

As similarly outlined in a related paper (Richards, 2011d), the micro-pillars of affordability, infrastructure/facilities and quality of education represent the key to the sustainability of the macro-pillars of the Education Hub model (i.e. marketisation, privatisation, and internationalisation). In discussing both macro and micro level imperatives, a distinction was made between a more *bottom-up* policy, knowledge, and capacity building approach and a rather *top-down* rhetoric and policy imperative. In this way, a case study distinction was made between Malaysia's initially 'muddled' development of an EH model and Singapore's more top-down approach from the start. This was reinforced by how the key issue of affordability informed Malaysia's priority of providing greater education access to its domestic students, whereas Singapore's strategy was based on the idea that exemplary infrastructure and facilities might be sufficient to become a successful broker of higher education provision especially to international students. In this way, the challenge of 'quality in education' has also tended to be approached in terms of an *either/or* tension between accessibility and privileged or elitist projections.

From a policy-building perspective, a top-down approach to the EH model (and educational internationalisation more generally) also requires solid foundations to inform a sustainable emergence. Figure 2 outlines the 'emergent corridor' by which macro-strategies and projections need to integrate various micro-aspects and cycles for sustainability to emerge and resilience to be achieved. To the extent

that different modes of knowledge and capacity building also reflect alternate processes and functions of leadership and learning (in the generic senses of these terms) we can outline the trajectory by which ideas and thought (i.e. a vision of possibility) are transformed into action across what might be called the ‘threshold of change’ – that is, the threshold at which short-term projections are transformed into long-term sustainability in terms of overcoming various contextual challenges, obstacles and restraints.

Figure 2. Education Hub policy and the *emergent corridor* of sustainable leadership, learning and capacity-building

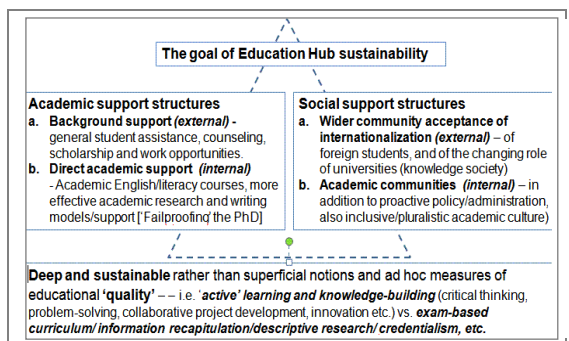


Adapted from Richards 2010c

Likewise, the main reasons why adequate academic and social structures of support are essential for EH sustainability are linked to how the concept might be recognised as an interplay of both macro-and micro-aspects and stages, that is, an unfolding process in which specific interventions may be needed to assist with the challenges of a diverse and changing environment . Thus for governments which aim to link their higher education sectors directly to policies of national investment and economic development, the challenge of adequate academic and social support structures are as much a critical factor of sustainable success as they are an opportunity for innovative and constructive leadership in the global domain of higher education. Table 1 thus maps out how distinct and inter-related notions of academic and social support structures represent a set of ‘missing links’ often underestimated or given lip-service to when

bold targets or projections are made. In this way we propose that adequate, sufficient and effective academic and social support structures are the pillars for deep ‘quality of education’ needed to transform the EH model into a sustainable policy.

Table 1. The key missing links: Intermediary pillars of Education Hub sustainability



A distinction might be made between *direct* and *background* modes and aspects of academic support for higher education students, especially postgraduate research students. Likewise a related distinction might also be made between *wider social support* and the *local academic community support* for higher education innovation, a learning paradigm shift and the idea of opening up to international students and influences. This includes international academic staff as well as global ideas. There will need to be sufficient degrees of inclusivity or multi-cultural tolerance for higher education internationalisation to take place in terms of an influx of significant numbers of international students who are also ‘foreigners’. For instance, although a relatively tolerant and multi-cultural society, Malaysia, like many other nations, has many illegal immigrants and associated challenges such as rising crime. There have been some widely reported incidents where foreigners have abused student visas in various ways. This has resulted in negative associations by some Malaysians towards not only foreigners but also the general policy of higher education internationalisation. In general, for wider community acceptance of higher education internationalisation there will need to be awareness of how such a policy can benefit local society in

different ways. While social mobility has become increasingly common in the age of globalisation, there is much ambivalence and even some resistance in most countries.

There is similarly growing awareness that governments and universities that aim to attract international students also need to provide various types of background support to maintain student satisfaction. This is especially so for those students who have incurred significant costs to come to another country to study. As indicated earlier some Asian countries trying to kick-start their higher education internationalisation programs have offered generous scholarships to attract students. Yet for others it may be critical to be allowed to work part-time either in the university as a tutor or assistant researcher for example or outside to support their studies. Many Asian countries currently do not allow or encourage such options. International students will also need available academic support directly related to both the challenges of knowledge-building (research design, academic inquiry and problem-solving) and language skills in a second language (Richards, 2010, 2011a). Others will need counselling support for a range of the challenges and obstacles to academic study which are often more extensive and intimidating for international students. Indeed it is common for international postgraduate students to suffer from isolation and feelings of inadequate support which often extend beyond that experienced by local and coursework students (Guilfoyle, 2006). Some colleges and universities recognise the importance of organising opportunities for international students to mix within both local academic community and also the wider society but many do not. Likewise some institutions more than others will encourage their own students and lecturers to undertake overseas and intra-university exchanges.

The distinction between ‘external’ and ‘internal’ aspects of academic and social support correspond to inter-related macro-and micro-dimensions of the related process of knowledge policy and capacity building. The ‘external’ provisions of both academic and social support represent the *necessary conditions* for developing a sustainable Education Hub based on the central requirement of attracting international students. Any country or university interested in sustainably attracting international students

will need to adequately address their needs and requirements. Even a nation such as Australia known in the past for reasonably high standards has seen fit to significantly revamp, update and formalise various forms of assistance and assurance provided to its international students (Walters, 2011). This is because of some unexpected challenges resulting from the large influx of international students in recent years. Some Asian universities that aim to further attract significant number of international students are developing such forms of academic and social support for these students but many will need to do better at the institutional level to continue to attract students. Also, such initiatives will need to be backed by larger national higher education policies and strategies which should also address some of the issues that extend beyond direct institutional assistance.

Although wider social support for educational internationalisation and background academic support will be necessary for success, they may not be sufficient. The 'internal' aspects of academic and social support reflect the value-added aspects and intrinsic dimensions of 'deep quality' in higher education and thus the key to sustainability. In relation to 'social support structures', we believe that the critical factor for sustainability will be that colleges and universities which aim to attract international students will also be committed to promote and achieve open-ended and inclusive local academic communities (M'Gonigle & Starke, 2006). This might also reflect how academics and researchers around the world refer to 'the academy' as the international community of scholars and also students engaged in higher education and research (Guerin & Green, 2009a). There is a fairly practical and even 'commercial' reason why it might be argued that those colleges, universities and national higher education sectors which view formal learning and the enterprise of knowledge as basically only a marketable commodity involving functions of accreditation, content transmission and knowledge accumulation are likely to struggle to compete in the long run. This is in contrast with those institutions which initiate, support and encourage the globalisation of academic culture consistent with how international academics and researchers tend to take a global as well as a local perspective, adopt universal standards and develop inter-related networks of both specialisation and convergence of interests (Wood, 2001; Guerin & Green, 2009b).

Sustaining the Asian Education Hub model?

Accelerating cross-border or transnational education and international student mobility represent a growing market which also expects not only deep and transferable standards of quality but also an inclusive diversity of international academic teachers and researchers (Guruz, 2008; Knight, 2009). International students are not just attracted by the ‘externals’ of affordability or exemplary infrastructure and facilities. They also often expect to find an open, diverse and vibrant academic culture with academic leaders who hold critical, innovative and global perspectives (Frew, 2006). This is why many are attracted as well as targeted by such transnational education promotion slogans as ‘we create truly global citizens’, the focus of a recent promotion in Malaysia by an Australian university (The Sunday Star, 2010). Despite other faults, many Western universities do at least formulate internal policies which recognise that international and intellectual diversity is a key to achieving the academic cultures which translate into more effective education in the long run and generate significant quantitative and qualitative improvements in research output.

For various reasons, many Asian universities and higher education systems do not greatly emphasise attracting, harnessing and integration of (as distinct from occasional visits by) international scholars. Those that do so to address an increasingly important international ranking indicator such as Singapore are yet struggling to develop local academic cultures which converge with enduring international academic conventions of open ended yet disinterested inquiry, the willing and collaborative sharing of ideas and the notion that a large percentage of valued foreign academics are a crucial key to future innovation (e.g. Garrett, 2005). Thus, it might be argued that one of the greatest obstacles to the sustainability of the Asian EH model is the associated view often voiced in Asian higher education contexts that mobile international academics are generally ‘guns for hire’ who therefore can be treated as such (Richardson, & Zikic, 2007; Bridges & Bartlett, 2008). This may be the case in some individual

instances but by and large, those who choose an academic career are generally not motivated by profit. Many would prefer to make a valued contribution to knowledge or society – with academics more likely than other groups to see themselves as ‘global citizens’ (Smith & Todd, 2007; Sanderson, 2008). Many Western universities and higher education policy-makers are aware that a high percentage of actively involved international staff are a key to the kind of academic diversity, cultural pluralism, collaborative innovation and critical standards that attract good students, better academic staff and more productive outcomes all around. Such insights need to be more effectively applied to the Asian EH model to ensure greater sustainability (Umpleby, Mekhonoshin & Vladimirov, 2011).

In terms of the related challenge of adequate and effective academic support structures for international (but also local) students, we similarly believe that the critical factor for sustainability will be efforts which more directly address and attempt to resolve the globally high rates of failure and incompleteness for postgraduate research students in particular. Although the landscape of higher education has changed dramatically in relation to future work and the global economy as indicated, Western universities have tended to tolerate what many believe to be an avoidable, unjustifiable and unsustainable situation on the basis of traditional views that institutions and academics cannot intervene in what are widely regarded as natural attrition rates (Lovitts, 2009). Most of the ‘PhD survival guides’ tend to focus on extra-curricular issues of background support (e.g. Guilfoyle, 2006) rather than on the challenge of inappropriate, out-of-date, and inadequate methods of preparing students undertaking academic research and writing in general, and generic skills of problem-solving, communicating, innovation and collaboration on the other (Kamler & Thomson, 2008). Likewise, there is not much recognition in Academia that international students often struggle with cross-cultural expectations about styles of academic communication, inquiry and problem-solving linked to sometimes inaccurate perceptions of academic passivity, plagiarism and conflicts about standards (e.g. Canagarajah, 2002; Lillis & Curry, 2010).

Future universities may need to do much better in providing direct academic support for all students. But this is an opportunity and not just a challenge for prospective Asian EH models. As discussed further in two related papers (Richards, 2011c, 2011d) in recent years governments in Asia and the Middle East have increasingly and enthusiastically embraced the Education Hub concept as a focus for economic development or transformation. We therefore suggest that a greater focus on adequate and appropriate academic and social support is needed to sustainably attract and maintain significant number of international students. The related pillars of privatisation, marketization, and internationalisation do not necessarily mean that the concept of education as a local and indeed global public good should be necessarily replaced with a more exclusive rationale of profit rationale per se.

Conclusion:

The Asian Education Hub model is generally premised on an assumption that universities and nations in the region and elsewhere have an opportunity to transform higher education in terms of its changing role as an alternately global and national focus of social and cultural inclusion and economic investment. In coming years, they might not only expand local provision or access to higher education but also provide a leading role and show the way in terms of how different forms of learning or knowledge-building can contribute to an inherently reciprocal or dialogical basis for a future global network society. There are aspects of this model which innovatively point to how universities and the higher education sectors of particular nations can and must redefine their role to lead an emerging world. Therefore, while it is understandable that many Asian governments and education policy-makers focus on the translation of possible projections of international students into national income, there is a danger that such projections will not be sustainable in the long term unless some of the 'missing links' are addressed.

Thus this paper has explored how, in relation to the pivotal targeting of international, especially postgraduate research students within the EH model, an adequate provision of academic and social

support structures grounded in a commitment to a deep and not merely surface ‘quality of education’ is needed for long-term sustainability. As we have further proposed, it will also require the kind of appropriate framework which ultimately views higher education, and indeed all education, as a global public good and not just a private or national benefit. In this way, we think that the central assumption of the EH model that education can function as a marketable commodity and service might be reconciled or rather converge with a larger ‘hub’ model of a global knowledge society and economy.

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