Under the shadow of the White Australia policy:

Commonwealth policies on private overseas students 1945-1972

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This article discusses Commonwealth policies towards private overseas students in the period between 1945 and 1972. The major theme of the paper is that the Australian Government took a generally reactionary stance towards private overseas students during this period, reacting to problems as they occurred rather than boldly initiating policy. Apart from vague notions of humanitarian and diplomatic goodwill, the Australian Government did not generally acknowledge that any concrete domestic benefits actually accrued from the private overseas student program. The paper concludes by briefly comparing and contrasting this earlier period of overseas student policy with current Commonwealth policies.

The limited historiography on international students in Australia during the 1950s and 1960s has generally focused on sponsored overseas students, most notably those who studied under the Colombo Plan (Casey 1986; Auletta 2000a; Auletta 2000b; Oakman 2002). Given that sponsored students received a great deal more political and journalistic attention than their private counterparts, this is not surprising. Ironically, although Australian Governments viewed sponsored students as a significant means of gaining diplomatic influence and goodwill in Asian countries, it was not until the 1980s that the national interest benefits of private international students—in all eras constituting the vast majority of overseas students in Australia—were systematically considered by the Government. This article is intended to fill a gap in our historical knowledge of private overseas students in Australia, concentrating on the major developments in Commonwealth policy between 1945 and 1972. It will highlight the essentially reactive rather than pro-active approach to overseas student policy-making generally taken by the
Commonwealth during this era. The paper will also show that the dominance of the White Australia policy through much of this period led Commonwealth officials to expend considerable energies on protecting the racial sensitivities of the Australian public regarding Asian overseas students while simultaneously preventing the notion of White Australia from affecting relations with Asian countries.

PRIVATE OVERSEAS STUDENTS: 1940S

Overseas students have been coming to Australia to study since at least 1904. However, for the first few decades of the twentieth century, their numbers were insignificant. The United Kingdom, Europe and North America were seen as more attractive destinations for overseas study right up until the Second World War, partly because their facilities were more comprehensive: Australia had limited postgraduate training opportunities, and PhD programs were non-existent until the latter half of the 1940s. It was only towards the end of World War II and the immediate post-war period that overseas students became a real policy issue for the Australian Government (Fraser 1984; Andressen 1993).¹

From late 1944 onwards, Australian authorities experienced growing demands by students from Asian countries to study in Australian educational institutions. The unprecedented demand from Asia would appear to have stemmed partly from a dawning realisation by the newer, developing nations of Asia of the proximity of Australia and its educational facilities. By 1948, some Australian universities were receiving 3-400 applications per year from Asian students, who were by now finding it difficult to gain entry to the overcrowded British and American universities of the post-war period (Commonwealth Office of Education [hereafter COE] c.1949; Harper 1958).

However, the Australian Department of External Affairs² and other Departments such as the Commonwealth Office of Education actively discouraged any influx of overseas students. The Australian Government was strongly committed to assisting former Australian servicemen and women to access training opportunities and academic studies, and was mindful of the limited resources and facilities currently available for students in Australia. Accordingly, overseas requests for training were generally given a lukewarm response that stressed the overcrowded nature of Australian universities and technical/agricultural colleges during the immediate post-war years up to about 1950 (See for example Weeden to Key, 3/4/1946, National Archives of Australia [hereafter NAA]; Chifley to Premier (NSW), 8 March 1946, NAA).³

Partly as a consequence of government discouragement, then, there were only 300 non-European students in Australia in 1947 (Heyes to Secretary (External Affairs), 2/6/1947, NAA). Australian Government concerns about limited facilities were very real, but the spectre of the White Australia policy still overshadowed government attitudes and policies towards overseas students. For instance, the White Australia policy seems to have been behind the Australian Government’s general refusal to countenance the possibility of trainees from Asian countries gaining experience and training in Australian
industry. When the Indian Government in 1947 expressed hopes that Australia might be willing to train Asian workers in skilled occupations, External Affairs was quick to advise the Australian High Commissioner in India on appropriate stalling tactics:

It would ... be quite impracticable to ... train Asiatic apprentices ... and any approach towards this end should be actively discouraged. In this connection you can state that the war has created a back-log of Australians requiring technical training. (External Affairs to Australian High Commissioner, New Delhi, 6/11/1947, NAA).

Soon afterwards the Secretary of External Affairs sent a memo to several diplomatic missions in Asian advising that facilities for training apprentices could not be considered, 'since various requests for these facilities have already had to be refused.' ('Educational Facilities in Australia', Memo from Secretary of the Department of External Affairs to Overseas Posts, 2/1/1948, NAA). Fears regarding White Australia's reception of an influx of Asian students must have played some part in rejecting calls for training which would have exposed Asians to contact with a broad range of Australians.

At least some Diplomatic officials, inundated with requests from Asian students, asked External Affairs to consider a more flexible approach to student entry in order to promote goodwill and to distract attention from the White Australia policy. Francis Stuart, political secretary at the Australian Commission, Singapore, suggested that Indonesian, Siamese and Burmese student entry should be encouraged. Unlike the Indians and Chinese, Stuart asserted, South East Asians had no intention of migrating permanently and thereby cheapening the price of labour: 'If we are honest we will admit that the White Australia policy is really a Chinese-and-Indian-restriction policy' (Stuart to MacMahon Ball, circa 7/6/1948, National Library of Australia [hereafter NLA]).

The Australian High Commissioner in India considered that 'the resentment felt by Indians because of their non-admission to Australia is likely to be considerably lessened if a generous attitude is adopted in the admission of tourists, students and merchants' (Australian High Commissioner, cited in Moodie to Secretary, External Affairs, 15/5/1947, NAA). External Affairs was impressed enough with this suggestion that it asked Immigration about the feasibility of allotting quotas for certain categories of temporary Indian visitors, 'especially for students' (Burton to Heyes, 23/5/1947, NAA). In reply Immigration insisted that its regulations were perfectly fine as they were: in any case, a quota system was bound to attract international claims of racial discrimination (Heyes to Burton, 2/6/1947, NAA).

In short, then, overseas student policy in the early postwar period was predominantly geared towards discouraging the growth of private overseas students in Australia, especially from Asia. In subsequent decades, however, the Australian Government was compelled to develop strategies to cope with an unprecedented (and largely unplanned) explosion in international student numbers.
PRIVATE OVERSEAS STUDENTS - 1950S AND 1960S

The number of private overseas students in any educational institution (primary, secondary or tertiary) rose from just over 1,500 in 1951 to 10,000 in 1967. (Hay to Hasluck, circa mid 1965, NAA; Department of Education and Science 1969) The biggest increase in private overseas student numbers occurred at the secondary school and university level, and the vast majority were students of Chinese ethnic origin, particularly those from Malaysia, Singapore and Hong Kong (Anon. 1965). By contrast, sponsored students under the Colombo Plan and smaller schemes represented 23 per cent of the total number of overseas students in tertiary institutions (universities, technical colleges etc.) in 1955; this had dropped to 16 per cent in 1964 (Anon. 1965). Only an average of around 1,500-1,600 overseas students had any form of Commonwealth, United Nations or Home sponsorship in the mid to late 1960s (Sydney Morning Herald 27/5/1966; Department of Education and Science 1970).

The rise in private overseas student numbers in Australia during the 1950s and 1960s occurred for several reasons. Key factors included Australia’s geographical proximity to Asia, its low cost of living compared to other English-speaking countries and the publicity given to Australia’s educational institutions via the Colombo Plan (established 1951). The advantages of gaining an Australian education became apparent to overseas students at a time when the demand for educational qualifications in Asia was radically expanding. For example, the decolonisation process certainly increased the demand for more qualified public administrators. Colonial rulers had tended to neglect the training of indigenous civil servants in the decades prior to independence; new countries such as Indonesia, Pakistan and Malaya subsequently turned to Australia for training (Harper 1963; Hodgkin 1966; Andressen 1993).

Dramatic population growth in Asia during the 1950s also influenced the increasing demand for an Australian-based education. The population explosion meant that the new nations of the region had to invest urgently in new technology and professional manpower to secure improvements in communication, sanitation, water supply, food production and social services. While South East Asian tertiary institutions were unable to accommodate a large growth of students in the short-term, Australian institutions were able to offer a substantial number of student places in areas such as medicine, science and engineering (Bryant 1961; Harper 1963).

Finally, cultural and racial factors came into play. For instance, many ethnic Chinese students from Malaya (renamed Malaysia in 1963) were compelled to seek overseas training because of post-independence government education policies which discriminated in favour of the indigenous Malays. Further, having become used to a British style education system, Malays sought out such an education in Australia. Numerous business-minded scholars were also seeking the commercial advantage of gaining enhanced skills in English through working towards a degree in an English-speaking country like Australia (Hodgkin 1962; Andressen 1993; Shu and Hawthorne 1996).
In direct contrast to the control and interest shown in Colombo Plan and other sponsored students during the 1950s and 1960s, the Australian Government did not have a strong policy commitment to the private overseas student program. For administrative and financial reasons, External Affairs and the Commonwealth Office of Education were extremely reluctant to commit themselves to a clearly defined set of responsibilities towards private overseas students. While conceding in 1960 that ‘incidental benefits’ could be made available to private overseas students, External Affairs noted that welfare funds were ‘available for Colombo Plan trainees only’. The Commonwealth Office of Education also had ‘a very heavy Colombo Plan commitment’, and could not give ‘excessive attention to private students’ (Minutes of Meeting at Department of External Affairs 28th September 1960, NAA).

It seems ironic that at the very time the Australian Government was emphasising the importance of goodwill and greater diplomatic links with Asia through scholarship schemes, it was jeopardising the effectiveness of the scholarships as a medium of geopolitical change by neglecting the majority of Asian students coming to Australia to study. With External Affairs and the Commonwealth Office of Education having no set Government responsibilities for non-sponsored students before 1966-67, private overseas students had little Government assistance during their stay. Moreover, when the Australian Government did have to intervene in private overseas student affairs, it had no strong policy framework to guide it.

Diplomatically, External Affairs could not avoid dealing with private overseas students, but its lack of defined responsibility for this group of students worked against producing an effective strategy for dealing with their problems. For example, it is striking how little knowledge of private overseas students the various Commonwealth Departments had at their fingertips. When an MP in 1965 asked how many Colombo Plan and other Asian students had graduated annually since 1950, it took a year to get the right information on Colombo Plan students. The Commonwealth did not even attempt to collate graduation statistics for private Asian students, because it did not have any data available. Moreover, data on students granted permanent residence had only been collated since 1965. This lack of knowledge had profound implications for the way policy was developed and ‘sold’ in the 1950s and 1960s: public servants, at least in some respects, were making decisions and assumptions based upon a very incomplete knowledge of the facts (see Parliamentary Question regarding Colombo Plan and other Asian students graduating and applying for permanent residence in Australia, file no. A463/50, 1965/4875, NAA).

For much of the 1950s and 1960s, the only Government Department with any clear responsibility towards private overseas students was Immigration, which had the ultimate say with regard to entry and departure with regard to this category of students. Immigration’s decision-making and actions towards private overseas students were governed in this period by a policy established in 1950 following a meeting of representatives of the Department of External Affairs, Immigration, the Commonwealth
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Office of Education and the University of Melbourne. The rules governing private overseas students between 1950 and 1966 were as follows:

a) Students may be admitted for primary studies, provided that they have reached their tenth birthday but not their sixteenth.

b) Maximum age for admission of students to high schools is nineteen years.

c) Maximum age to remain for secondary studies is 24 years.

d) University Studies: no limits to age at the time of entry and no set limit to the time of stay. If the student fails an exam, the university authorities will determine whether the student can remain to undertake alternative studies.

e) Postgraduate students: Maximum stay is three years. No age limit.

f) Technical students: No age limit. Students may complete course as long as progress remains satisfactory.

g) Students seeking admission for accountancy courses require an entrance standard equivalent to the Australian Leaving Certificate.

h) Ad hoc students: students undertaking special courses (e.g. public administration) can stay for periods of up to 12 months (Heydon to Opperman, 25/3/1965, NAA).

Clearly, the above regulations governing the entry of overseas students from 1950 onwards were very relaxed. This was a reflection, possibly, of the relatively low level of overseas students in Australia at the beginning of the Menzies era.

PRIVATE OVERSEAS STUDENTS: PROBLEMS AND ISSUES 1950 TO 1967

The remarkable surge in private overseas student numbers in the 1950s and 1960s coincided with the massive expansion of the tertiary sector in Australia. In 1960, there were 53,338 students enrolled in Australian universities. By 1968, student numbers had reached 100,000 (Connell 1993). Understandably, one of the biggest themes in education policy between 1950 and 1967 was Government fear of overcrowding in Australia institutions, and the related fear of having to turn away great numbers of domestic students. Consequently, when the issue of private overseas students occupied the attention of public servants during the 1950s and 1960s, it was mainly to question the legitimacy of fee-paying international students in the context of increasing Australian competition for student places and facilities. Three main questions were perennially addressed: were the private students who were attracted to Australia using our educational facilities legitimately, was the national interest being served by the private overseas student program, and what, if any, limitations should the Commonwealth place on overseas student numbers in a growing education sector?
Although there seems to have been no detailed policy regarding private overseas students beyond Immigration matters before 1966, there was at least some interdepartmental agreement, in practice, that the Australian Government objectives for permitting private overseas students to study in Australia were essentially the same as those of the Colombo Plan—that is, "to contribute to the economic and social development of the countries from which students come and to [foster] Asian understanding of and sympathy for Australian ways and attitudes" (Hay to Hasluck, circa mid 1965, NAA). With this in mind, Immigration and External Affairs agonised over the best and most diplomatic way to control the selection and progress of private overseas students. As D.W. McNichol (Australian Commissioner, Singapore) warned,

If too many unsuccessful students return, we may run the risk of having a sizeable number of students who are dissatisfied with Australian educational conditions and correspondingly with Australia in general (McNichol to Tange, 13/6/1958, NAA).

External Affairs and Immigration did make concerted attempts to monitor the academic progress of Asian scholars in the 1950s and 1960s, but their attempts to 'weed out' poor performing private overseas students had only limited success. There was certainly a marked reluctance on the part of some educational institutions to terminate badly performing private Asian students. For example, the Migration Office in Melbourne noted in 1955 that ethnic Chinese from Hong Kong were gaining entry to educational institutions for the purpose of immigration: many such students enrolled in the Austral Coaching College which tolerated poor attendance because the Chinese were a big source of income (£17 17s per term) (Commonwealth Migration Office, Melbourne to Secretary, Department of Immigration, January 1955 [no exact date], NAA).

The Department of External Affairs also had difficulty in the 1950s in maintaining a co-operative and co-ordinated relationship with certain educational institutions that sought to gain financially from the Asian student presence. External Affairs could not prevent, for example, educational institutions enrolling private Asian students who switched courses and institutions without informing the authorities (Arnott to Diplomatic Posts in Asia, 23/6/1953, NAA).

The issue of private Asian students as a cashcow for Australian education institutions cropped up again in the 1960s. City Commercial Business colleges were particularly noted as tolerating substandard progress from Asian private students due to the income they brought in: 'Because of the “business” nature of these colleges, the principals are reluctant to report on lack of progress, attendance, misbehaviour etc.' (Tabinner, Report on Non-European Students, NAA). The Immigration Department appears to have also been obstructed by some educational institutions with more idealistic reasons for not co-operating with Immigration's demand for statistics on foreign student progress. Immigration believed that part of the reason it was so difficult to extract academic information from some schools was that several educationists took the view that any official interest in overseas student data was a 'simple illustration of the
“White Australia policy” in action.’ (Department of Immigration (Central Office) to Commonwealth Directors of Migration, 11/11/1965, NAA).

The Immigration Department cracked down upon the issue of poor attendance as the decade wore on, with Immigration officials personally visiting schools to obtain the basic academic information which institutions were frequently reluctant to provide (White to Emerton, 4/6/1965, NAA). Nevertheless, Immigration remained willing to respect the autonomy of tertiary institutions, even to the point of permitting, in one case, a Technical College to effectively limit certain overseas students to an 11-12 hour a week course because of poor performance, thus contradicting the general policy that private overseas students should be engaged in full-time study. Peter Heydon, Secretary of Immigration, noted that although these students were not ‘from a strict immigration point of view’ full-time students, Immigration had to abide by the decisions of the educational institution involved (Heydon to Cole, 10/4/1962, NAA). 4

Apart from attempting to prevent private overseas students from abusing the education system, External Affairs in particular was concerned that the numbers of private overseas students of a Chinese ethnic origin was abnormally high: by 1965, roughly 79 per cent of all Asian students were of Chinese descent, principally from South East Asian countries (Emerton to Assistant Secretary, Entry Policy Branch, 16 December 1965). External Affairs wondered whether this was perhaps undesirable from a national interest point of view (Hay to Hasluck, circa mid 1965, NAA). Cold War fears of Chinese Communist infiltration undoubtedly influenced External Affairs thinking, but Australian diplomatic self-interest was also a key factor:

It seems unlikely that the residents of Hong Kong who are of adolescent age at present will be in a position to exercise influence beneficial to Australia within their lifetime, given the uncertain future of the colony and the probable permanency of Communist control in adjacent China (Tange to Secretary, Immigration, 8/5/1964, NAA).

As a consequence of this reasoning, External Affairs Secretary Sir Arthur Tange suggested in 1964 that the Australian Government might introduce a quota for Hong Kong students: ‘If public explanation was necessary ... it might be best to state that the limit of what Australian educational institutions could absorb had been reached’ (Tange to Secretary, Immigration, 8/5/1964, NAA). There is no evidence to suggest that Tange’s suggestion was taken seriously. Significantly, an Immigration Official pointed out that ‘To exclude the children of wealthy Chinese would be to reduce the private student programme by approximately four-fifths’ (Emerton to Assistant Secretary, Entry Policy Branch, 16/12/1965, NAA). This was a rare, early acknowledgment of the financial importance of private overseas students to the education sector.

**THE PROPOSED ‘CEILING’ ON OVERSEAS STUDENTS**

Tange’s idea of a quota for students of Hong Kong students may have been rejected, but the concept of restricting the total numbers of private overseas students was seriously
debated by Government officials during much of the 1950s and 1960s. Anxiety within Government departments about the unchecked numbers of private overseas students arriving in Australia began in earnest in 1957. In this year External Affairs attempted to gather information on how many Asian students were likely to come to Australia in the next five or so years. Most Australian posts contacted by External Affairs tended to predict a fairly stable number of private students in the near future, although the authorities in Singapore predicted a strong rise in medical and law students from Malaya (See International Relations- Students- Indian and Eurasian, file no. A1361/1 4/19/4 PART 9, NAA).

The Australian Government remained concerned, nonetheless, at the possibility of overcrowding in Australian institutions. By 1959-60, External Affairs warned,

The pressure on our educational institutions caused by the Australian war time and post-war birth rate ... will be extremely heavy. Already Victorian technical colleges have hinted that they may have to restrict the intake of private Asian students in the near future (Dexter to Posts, 2 April 1957, NAA).

The contentious issue of private overseas students theoretically taking domestic student places remained current well into the 1960s. Because of limited facilities, Australian universities gradually introduced quotas for popular courses, restricting the number of qualified students of all categories who could gain entry. Although some universities (e.g. University of Sydney, University of Queensland) also introduced specific restrictions on the number of foreign students they would admit (Askin to Holt, 4/3/1966, NAA; Emerton to Assistant Secretary, Entry Policy Branch, 16/12/1965, NAA), the high level of private overseas student numbers still caused anxiety among Commonwealth and State officials.

There were certainly some grounds for New South Wales Premier R.W. Askin’s suggestion that some local students were missing out on opportunities because of the congestion of Asian student numbers in certain State tertiary institutions (Askin to Holt, 4/3/1966, NAA). For example, by 1965 the University of New South Wales had an unusually large overseas student component in two faculties with highly competitive quotas: Engineering (25.7%) and Medicine (33.2%) (Gorton 1966). Further, strains on technical colleges because of increasing overseas student numbers had been noted by the Commonwealth since the late 1950s (Dexter to Posts, 2/4/1957, NAA). The Sydney Morning Herald claimed in 1966 claimed that ‘Some of our technical colleges are severely taxed by about 1,500 [students]’; although conceding that the problem could be partly solved ‘by spreading the numbers over more institutions, particularly those outside New South Wales, Victoria and New South Wales.’ (Student exchange, editorial, in Sydney Morning Herald, 27/5/1966).

Senator John Gorton, Minister in Charge of Commonwealth Activities in Education and Research under the Prime Minister (1963-1966) and Minister for Education and Science (1966-1968), developed an interest in the perceived problem of overseas student congestion, and became attracted to the idea of a quota on the number of non-European
overseas students studying in Australia at any one time. 'No wealthy Chinese or Japanese', Gorton privately insisted, 'has any right at all to send his child for education in Australia' (Gorton to Hasluck, 15/11/1965, NAA). Gorton's passionate advocacy of a quota may have been influenced by growing public interest and media attention regarding private overseas students and their place in Australian education institutions (see Age editorial, 24/1/1963; Playboys from Asia Sent Home, Sun Herald, 18/8/1963; Students Get their Way, Canberra Times, 4/1/1966).

Gorton attempted to persuade Cabinet to introduce legislation that would actively prevent any further overall percentage rise in European and non-European overseas student numbers studying in Australian tertiary institutions. With the presumed assistance of State authorities, the Minister wanted the Commonwealth to stabilise overseas tertiary student numbers at their current level. At the time of Gorton's Cabinet submission (1966), overseas students comprised roughly ten per cent of all full-time university enrolments (Gorton 1966; 'Private Overseas Students in Universities and Other Tertiary Colleges', 30/12/1966, NAA).

Gorton's argument, essentially, was that the private overseas student program was a drain on taxpayer funded educational institutions, and that it was becoming difficult for prospective Australian students to compete for entry in certain faculties (particularly Medicine). Universities were the greatest expense, with the Commonwealth and States spending an estimated $6,184,000 per annum of its funding contributions in this sector on 5,007 private and sponsored students (1966) ('Submission No. 494', 4/10/1967, NAA). Australian governments, Gorton complained, were being asked to "provide the equivalent of one University with an enrolment of 4,500, one technical school with an enrolment with an enrolment of 1,800, three high schools with an enrolment of 1,200 each ... all of this for private Asian students who pay virtually nothing towards the capital and recurrent costs of the institutions" (Gorton to Hasluck, 15/11/1965, NAA) Gorton believed that the case for a quota on overseas students in tertiary education was a strong one, especially as the proposal came at a time when 'governments have been obliged to limit the provision of funds for universities because of the needs of other tertiary institutions and of primary and secondary education'. ('Private Overseas Students in Universities and Other Tertiary Colleges', 30/12/1966, NAA).

Nothing came of Gorton's proposal to limit the number of private overseas students in Australia. In the first place, Cabinet was not convinced that overseas student numbers were at a dangerous level, especially since the percentage of total overseas students to full-time enrolments at Australian universities had actually declined between 1962 (12.25%) and 1965 (9.83%) (Decision No. 147, 9/3/1967, NAA). Secondly, the Australian Government was concerned about the political and diplomatic implications of quota:

There is considerable goodwill throughout Asian countries towards Australia's readiness to admit Asian students to our universities etc. To announce a restriction in numbers will be misconstrued particularly when there is no appreciable increase in the numbers ('Notes on Cabinet Submission No. 21', NAA).
Cabinet’s rejection of the quota idea was undoubtedly informed by the views of senior public servants in the Departments that would be affected by the changes. The Prime Minister’s Department and Immigration both poured cold water over the proposal because of potential administrative headaches the imposition of a quota would cause (Throssell, Notes on Interdepartmental Meeting ..., NAA). Perceptively, Senior Migration Officer I.D. Emerton noted that ‘educationalists are more concerned with the use of improved standards to regulate the admission of overseas students than [regulating student entry via] a quota system’ (Emerton to Assistant Secretary, Entry Policy Branch, 16/12/1965, NAA).

PRIVATE OVERSEAS STUDENTS: CHANGES TO GOVERNMENT POLICY

While the drastic option of a quota was ultimately consigned to the filing cabinet, the Commonwealth’s attitudes towards overseas students during the 1960s nevertheless did undergo a radical change. As the decade continued, the Australian Government took greater responsibility for the welfare of foreign private students. For much of the 1960s, External Affairs had no direct responsibility for private Asian students, but found it had no choice but to get involved in a limited way via its liaison officers for sponsored students in Sydney and Melbourne. The Department was subsequently pressured by the Western Australian Premier David Brand to appoint a liaison officer in Perth. The inability (or refusal?) of the Western Australian government to cope with the welfare problems of both private and sponsored Asian students in Western Australian technical schools (e.g. difficulty finding accommodation near the institutions, non-existence of social facilities and the paucity of Asian-Australian interaction) compelled it to seek Commonwealth support. (Mendelsohn to Partridge, 18/7/1963, NAA; ‘Report of the Committee of Enquiry into Living Conditions of Asian Students’, 1963, NAA). Western Australia had the highest proportion of overseas students in relation to total state population in Australia by 1965 mostly Malaysian and was struggling with issues such as the appropriate way to ensure that Asian students understood different cultural expectations, particularly regarding living arrangements (Hodgkin 1966).

External Affairs was ultimately convinced that it needed to make a stronger contribution to the management of private (and sponsored) overseas student affairs in Western Australia. Indeed, overseas student welfare concerns actually influenced the decision to open up a branch of the Department of External Affairs in Perth during 1963. Speaking of the proposed Head of the Branch, Mr. Pratyman, an External Affairs officer wrote: ‘Basically, his job will be student welfare, but my understanding is that he will generally represent External Affairs in Perth’ (Mendelsohn to Partridge, 18/7/1963, NAA).

External Affairs may have been inspired to take a greater interest in Western Australia because of the negative media coverage (local and foreign) regarding private Asian students during the early 1960s. Several articles were published which encouraged the perception that a significant minority of Asian students were more interested in
having a good time than studying. The comments of Perth journalist Ian Hummerston were typical of those published at the time: ‘[M]ost of the Asian students who come here to ‘break loose’ are from wealthy families, prepared to pay heavily to have their offspring educated in Western ways.’ The Singapore Free Press even went so far as to claim that ‘As teachers in all the Singapore secondary schools will agree, boys and girls who never made the grade here have been sent to Australia for “higher studies”’ (Straits Times, 15/2/1962 and Free Press [undated clipping circa February 1962], enclosed in Jockel to Tange, 15/2/1962, NAA). External Affairs was later disturbed to find that negative newspaper reports contained background information and opinions supplied by the Perth Migration Office (Kersley to Cole, 2/2/1962, NAA). The bad publicity generated by the newspapers had the potential to damage Australia’s educational reputation overseas, and undoubtedly highlighted the need for more intensive External Affairs management of private foreign students.

The trend towards greater Commonwealth involvement with private overseas students was accentuated by the announcement in 1966 of a clear public policy towards private and sponsored foreign students by the Minister for Immigration, Hubert Opperman:

I must emphasise that it would be quite wrong and most unfair to the development of countries whence they came to offer to the 12,000 Asian students in Australia the right to settle here ... The objective of admitting these young people, to use educational facilities which are both expensive to the Australian Government and in great demand, is to help the students’ homelands by increasing their numbers of qualified people ... Greater effort is to be made to ensure that courses undertaken will be of recognised value to the students’ homeland when they return there (Opperman 1966).

Opperman’s stress on the development of skills and knowledge to assist developing countries was combined with a revised Immigration policy which applied stricter conditions on the entry of private overseas students as means of preventing abuses. These measures, which largely replaced the 1950 regulations, were as follows:

a) Entry to primary schools to be eliminated except in special categories, such as a boarder at a non-government school.

b) Entry to secondary schools to be limited to the final two years of secondary education, and the student to be given to understand that successful completion of those studies will not confer automatic entitlement to continue study at tertiary level.

c) Entry for higher secondary, tertiary and other post-school level studies to be limited to those who have an adequate command of English, are qualified to enrol in and intend to follow courses likely to be of benefit in their own countries, but which are not readily available there.

d) Greater opportunity to be given for practical training in business and non-academic pursuits.
e) Entry to be by temporary permit, valid for no more than 12 months, and renewable for periods of up to 12 months at a time, provided satisfactory progress has been made (Gorton 1966).

The greater restrictions on entry for primary and secondary overseas students were an attempt by Immigration to prevent the ‘Australisanisation’ of young people who may be reluctant to return to their own countries after long periods in Australian educational institutions (‘Agenda Item No. 12’, in Heydon to Secretary, PM’s Department, 20/4/1964, NAA). More significant was the decision to introduce 12-month temporary permits for overseas students. It not only implied greater Government controls on immigration, it was also a strong acknowledgment that the Commonwealth had some responsibility for this category of students.

The review of the regulations governing private overseas students had its most noticeable impact on the Department of Education and Science (formerly Commonwealth Office of Education). After a long period of having responsibility only for sponsored overseas students, the workload of Education officers was substantially increased during the late 1960s. For example, guidance and counselling for private overseas students regarding individual academic progress was now available through regional offices of the Department. Further, welfare officers were available in each capital city in case the private students experienced personal hardships like illnesses. In addition, the Department annually compiled information about Australian courses and institutions for the benefit of prospective private students from overseas and the Australia Missions who had to deal with their applications (Department of Education and Science 1969; Department of Education and Science 1970; Anon. 1967). The fact that Public Relations Officer (UNSW) George Caiger felt the need, in 1965, to advise universities to produce leaflets for overseas students with general information on courses and the importance of the English language suggests that the benefits of providing comprehensive information to overseas students appear to have been less obvious before the late 1960s (Caiger 1965).

Further, the Department of Education and Science had two new responsibilities which enforced the power of the new regulatory regime. First, Immigration now routinely asked the Department of Education and Science for advice on students who had failed to ‘make satisfactory progress, or when they request permission to change to another course ... or wish to proceed to further training’ (Department of Education and Science 1969). Eventually, on 1 December 1973, the Whitlam Labor Government gave the overall responsibility of monitoring the academic progress of private overseas students to the Department of Education, a role which had previously been carried out by Immigration (Department of Education 1974). Secondly, the Government’s emphasis on competence in the English language was backed up by the Department of Education and Science’s implementation (from 1966) of English attainment tests for prospective students at major Australian overseas posts (e.g. Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Fiji and Thailand) (Department of Education 1969).
External Affairs also took on new roles following the Immigration reforms of 1966. Overseas Missions dealing with student applications now had the duty to reject any private overseas applicants whose proposed course of study had no ‘assessed demand [in the home country]’ (Shann 1972). External Affairs’ new role as a watchdog with regard to what it saw as excessive overseas student immigration was, however, self-imposed. Despite the new Immigration rules concerning foreign students, External Affairs was not convinced that conditions for the return of overseas students were sufficiently strict to prevent abuses. The Department noted with concern that the period 1966-1968 had seen a rise in the number of overseas students staying in Australia after their studies. While private overseas students made up most of this total, External Affairs was also worried about the possible affect that an overly liberal Immigration attitude on the return of students might have on the future actions of sponsored students. External Affairs was subsequently approached by the Cambodian, Burmese and Vietnamese Governments about the importance of ensuring that students returned home (Plimsoll to Hasluck, 6/12/1968, NAA; Shann to Hasluck, 24/12/1968, NAA).

Between March 1966 and June 1968, 1,215 former private students had been allowed to stay in Australia, which External Affairs partially attributed to Immigration’s overly lax attitudes. Immigration refused to deport students on the grounds that deportation was generally reserved for criminals and other undesirables. Some students with poor academic records were allowed to stay studying in Australia despite Department of Education and Science recommendations to Immigration that they cease study (Plimsoll to Hasluck, 6/12/1968, NAA).

The crux of the matter was that External Affairs believed that the general principle of the private overseas student program (i.e. that students be educated in areas that will benefit their homelands) was being undermined ‘without full consideration of the effects upon the developing countries ... and Australia’s relationships with them’ (Plimsoll to Hasluck, 6/12/1968, NAA). While the number of sponsored students remaining in Australia after completion of study was small in the 1960s, External Affairs was nevertheless disturbed that despite its advice, certain students had been allowed by Immigration to stay. External Affairs took a tough line: it recognised marriage as an excuse for sponsored students staying, but other reasons for example, dangerous regimes in the home country or fear of unemployment were not seen by the Department as valid. External Affairs believed that if it became patently obvious that private students were being allowed to stay in Australia without serious consequences, sponsored students would be inclined to follow suit (Plimsoll to Hasluck, 6/12/1968, NAA).

Immigration’s view, or at least that of its secretary Peter Heydon, was that if it took a tough attitude towards enforcing deportation, the Government would receive intense public criticism: ‘insistence on return of successful students, to homelands where they lack opportunities to use qualifications acquired here, would create a bad impression of Australia which in recent times has been avoided with some success’. Heydon saw no justification for arbitrarily returning private overseas students whose skills could be put
to good use here if their home countries could not employ them. In any event, the number of students who were being granted resident status in 1966-68 was small compared with the number of private students (roughly 33,000) who had trained in Australia since World War Two (Heydon to Secretary (External Affairs), 4/6/1969, NAA).

External Affairs ultimately fought a long but ultimately unsuccessful interdepartmental battle to try and get Immigration to adopt a tougher policy towards returning students. With no legal authority to force students to board planes, and with Immigration refusing to budge, the matter was left unresolved. ‘The Department of Immigration’ observed External Affairs officer Ric Throssell (Director, International Training Section) in 1969, ‘while playing lip service to the principle that sponsored students should return, simply will not oblige them to do so in those rare cases where they refuse to go voluntarily’ (Throssell to Campbell, 22/9/1969, NAA). Nevertheless, the fact that External Affairs would so passionately fight for this matter in the late 1960s tends to suggest that its officers believed they had political support for a tougher position on Asian students, a view that was probably inspired by Gorton’s stand on overseas quotas. As T.B. McCarthy of External Affairs confided to Throssell,

Immigration is obviously acting on ... advice not to raise [the question of returning overseas students] ... before the [1969 Federal] election ... I think we have been privately harbouring the view that the Prime Minister [John Gorton] may continue to observe the views he stated when he was Minister for Education and Science on this issue. He is no longer a junior Minister and his attitude ... might not be the same ... the fact of the matter is that the only country that seems to be excited about the issue is Vietnam (McCarthy to Throssell, 11/9/1969, NAA).

The triumph of a more liberal Immigration attitude towards overseas students is reflective of the wider shifts in public perceptions in racial matters. This was evident, for example, in the overwhelming support of the 1967 referendum to grant further Aboriginal citizenship rights (Brawley 1995). The process of dismantling White Australia had begun with the Migration Act 1958 which allowed for the naturalisation of non-Europeans after fifteen years in Australia. The Migration Act was followed in 1966 with the bipartisan acceptance of an Immigration policy which gave non-Europeans the same naturalisation timeframe as Europeans (a minimum of 5 years in Australia). Moreover, the new policy allowed for increased numbers of non-European settlers on the basis of character, qualifications and skills. The Whitlam Labor Government finally abolished the White Australia policy in 1973: an important consideration in the formulation of overseas student policy was now defunct (Alexander 1972; Sherington 1990; Brawley 1995; Tavan 2004).

Whitlam also introduced changes in 1973 that ultimately led to a radical reassessment of the Commonwealth’s attitudes towards overseas students by the end of the decade. Whereas overseas students between 1945 and 1972 were compelled to return home, Whitlam now permitted graduates to remain in Australia after their study. Labor also abolished university fees for domestic students, as well as private and sponsored
overseas students. The subsequent Malcolm Fraser-led Liberal-National Government (1975-1983) questioned Whitlam’s of use of free tertiary education as a form of indiscriminate, indirect Federal aid to overseas countries. Consequently, from 1980 onwards, private overseas students were compelled to pay an annual overseas student charge as a contribution to the costs of their education. In addition, they were required to return to their country of origin after completing their studies (Fraser 1984). Finally, in 1986, the Australian Labor Government (1983-1996) introduced a category of full-fee paying students, phasing out partly subsidised private overseas students by the mid 1990s. The introduction of full-fee paying students was economically inspired, with the Commonwealth attempting to use the creation of an international education market to improve Australia’s balance of trade figures and to avoid having to increase funding to the tertiary sector (Burke 1989; Hudson 1990; Nesdale et al. 1995; ARIES 2001). In little over a decade, then, the Australian Government’s attitude towards international students had changed from being governed by a diplomatic and (sometimes) humanitarian outlook to being forcefully guided by domestic economic goals.

Private overseas student policy since the mid 1980s has been informed by a mixture of old and new Government attitudes. Certainly, there is now a greater Government emphasis on detailed qualitative and quantitative data on private overseas students than ever before: the need for the education industry to understand the ‘market’ has provided a compelling incentive for the Government to invest in research (Nelson 2003). Nevertheless in some ways, the Australian Government’s chief policy role regarding private overseas students remains similar to earlier decades. Fundamentally, the Government still sees itself as a ‘gatekeeper’. It controls immigration, manages crises and enforces educational/welfare standards via legislation. Compared with the 1950s and 1960s, however, the Commonwealth is now a very non-interventionist gatekeeper, leaving much of the monitoring and implementation of Government-initiated private overseas student policy to the States/Territories and the educational institutions themselves (ARIES 2001; Lazenby & Blight 1999; DEST 2002).

CONCLUSION

As we have seen, much of the focus of the Commonwealth during the period under review (1945-1972) was on managing private overseas student problems and concerns within the framework of the White Australia policy. Australia’s official response towards private overseas student issues was unguided by a decent policy framework until 1966, when the Commonwealth accepted the need to monitor the academic progress and welfare of private overseas students in a more comprehensive fashion. From the 1940s to the 1970s, the Commonwealth primarily saw the private overseas student program as an extension of the sponsored student program: study in Australia was presumed to be a step towards the individual making an effective professional contribution to the economic development of his/her country of origin. However, the benefits to Australia of hosting sponsored and private overseas students were seen by the Australian
Government as largely being limited to diplomatic gains (e.g. goodwill). The commercial, economic and social benefits of the student presence were of limited significance to a Government pre-occupied with the expansion of domestic education opportunities in the 1950s and 1960s.

NOTES

1 The Commonwealth Office of Education noted that Asian students were frequently sending applications to more than one university at the same, but did not list the affected universities by name. (COE c.1949).

2 The Department of External Affairs became the Department of Foreign Affairs in the early 1970s.

3 Note: these are archival sources. For reasons of space, when archival references are referred to in the text, only the surnames of the correspondents, the date of the letter (e.g. 3/4/1946) and the archives at which the information is located is mentioned (in some cases, titles of official reports are given). Full referencing for archival sources is located at the reference section of the paper.

4 Immigration approved some part-time courses for overseas students where workplace training was a vital component, e.g. Nursing (See Hodgkin 1966).

5 The Department had changed its name from the Department of Education and Science to the Department of Education on 19 December 1972.

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