ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Explaining Government Policy Inaction on International Student Housing in Australia: The Perspectives of Stakeholders

Gaby Ramia[1] · Emma Mitchell[2] · Alan Morris[3] · Shaun Wilson[4] ·
Catherine Hastings[3] · Jake Davies[1]

Abstract

Housing is a major concern for many international students. This is especially so in those countries where students are mostly dependent on the private market for their accommodation. Australia is one such country, and is one of the world's major destinations for international students. This article analyses governmental failure to address problems relating to international student housing affordability and conditions. Using theory on 'policy inaction' to frame the analysis, we draw on 20 interviews with policy stakeholders to explain the Australian government's reliance on: (1) market-based housing provision for international students, and (2) a longstanding policy preference not to provide support. Interviewees were widely critical of the lack of action to address international student housing problems and understood inaction in relation, rather than in opposition, to the dominance of market-based action in housing and higher education. However, analysis of stakeholder perspectives also illuminates how policy-making *action* benefiting some emerges as *inaction* for others left behind or overlooked by the status quo. The interview data points to the need for government to overhaul its policy framework, and in doing so, to collaborate with higher education providers in revising the market-based regulatory approach. The main implications for theory and policy are discussed.

Keywords International student housing · Policy inaction · Policy stakeholders · International education stakeholders · Governance networks

✉ Gaby Ramia
gaby.ramia@sydney.edu.au

Extended author information available on the last page of the article

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Introduction

Housing is a serious concern for many international students, particularly in countries where full tuition fees and dependence on the private rental sector are the norm. These conditions characterise the situation in Australia, where international student housing is governed by the market. In that country, the lack of any requirement to provide subsidised housing means that finding affordable and adequate accommodation is a major challenge for a considerable proportion of international students (Morris et al. 2021a, b). When this problem is considered alongside the cumulative disadvantages arising from language proficiency and lags in cultural adaptation, it becomes clear that international students are more vulnerable than domestic students to landlord exploitation in rental accommodation (Marginson et al. 2010; Morris et al. 2021a, b). Although there have been measures to increase housing supply through private investment in purpose-built student accommodation (PBSA) (Ziguras et al. 2020), few measures have been introduced to address affordability, security of tenure or the condition of housing stock.

Australia is one of the world's most important destinations for international students. The USA is first, and Australia is equal second, with the UK, in relation to the total share of enrolled international students. Australia also ranks second, after Luxembourg, in terms of the ratio of international-to-domestic students (OECD 2021). Despite their importance to the nation, however, international students have few social rights in policy or law (Ramia 2017). The *Education Services for Overseas Students* (ESOS) *Framework* (DESE 2018, 2021), combining the *ESOS Act* and the accompanying *National Code of Practice* for providers, does not compel either the government or education providers to furnish specific services such as housing. Instead, the only specification is for *information provision* on them. Although housing is mentioned in relevant national legal and regulatory instruments, these do not mandate the provision of accommodation, with a partial exception for students under 18 years of age.

The question of *why* there is government inaction on international student housing represents a puzzle. With this in mind, the paper draws on 20 interviews with informants with expert knowledge of the housing problems faced by international students, to examine how they understand policy inaction in the area. The analysis of stakeholder perspectives is anchored in a conceptual model of inaction devised by McConnell and 't Hart (2019) and situated the broader policy and operational landscape of international students in Australian higher education. Stakeholder perspectives highlight their longstanding dissatisfaction. Moreover, attention to stakeholder understandings of different 'drivers' and 'types' of inaction, in McConnell and 't Hart's (2019) terms, demonstrates how unmet needs for public investment or intervention are seen to derive from the hegemony of acting through the market. In other words, policy action favouring commercial investors occurs at the expense of policy inaction addressing the needs of those who lose out in a financialised model of student housing. In relying on stakeholder data, our analysis makes a unique but complementary contribution to the literature on

international student housing, which often understandably draws on data from students themselves (see, for example: Marginson et al. 2010; Morris et al. 2021a, b). The paper also contributes to an important, fledgling focus on inaction in a sub-field of public policy.

The first section following this introduction discusses the role of the market in international student housing provision in major exporter countries, and in Australia. The second section reviews the literature on policy inaction. The third outlines the methodology, and the fourth details the data analysis and the findings. Finally, the fifth section discusses the implications of the analysis for theory and policy.

Acting Through the Market: Housing for International Students

Comparative context

It has been recognised that government policy that addresses housing for international students is inadequate in most contexts (Netz 2015; Burke 2015; Morris et al. 2021a, b). Major subsidies on student housing are not common, though there are exceptions. France and Germany, for example, provide a free or low-fee education for all students, domestic and international, and some subsidised accommodation opportunities; though this is not the norm (Campus France 2021; Hunter 2021). Anglophone countries typically combine full tuition fees with the expectation that students are responsible for finding and fully funding their own accommodation. Invariably, this accommodation is in private rental markets. Accordingly, there has been a substantial expansion in market-based, purpose-built student accommodation (PBSA) in the English-speaking countries (Holton and Mouat 2021; Kinton et al. 2018; Revington and August 2020; Reynolds 2020). Often encouraged by tax incentives, PBSA is viewed as an attractive investment by major corporations. For example, 2020 was a record-breaking year in this area for the UK, where £5.77 billion was invested in the PBSA—an increase from less than £300 million in 2010 (Bowles and Daly 2021).

A key feature of PBSA is that it is a profit-oriented activity linked to the financialisation of housing (Revington and August 2020). The accommodation is rented out at market rates, which for many international students are not affordable. PBSA developments often contribute to substantial rent increases in the neighbourhoods in which they are located. For example, in an area in Waterloo, Canada, it is estimated that rents for a student bed increased by around 23% 'between 2003 (at the start of the PBSA boom) and 2014, after accounting for inflation' (Revington and August 2020, 868).

Linked to the increasing importance of PBSA is 'studentification', which is defined as a situation where a neighbourhood becomes dominated by student accommodation (Kenna 2011). In many cities with universities, parts of the city are being transformed both physically and socially through the construction of PBSA intermingled with more traditional student accommodation (Fincher and Shaw 2009; Kenna 2011). Studentification often involves the destruction of older residential dwellings, the building of towers and gentrification of the area in question; and

'universities and their students are also now central players in urban gentrification' (Chatterton 2010, 512). Security is a key feature of PBSA and results in 'blank street frontages that have no interaction with the life outside' (Fincher and Shaw 2009, 1892). This tends to shut their occupants off from contact with the local population, contributing to the isolation of housing problems from government attention.

The Australian context

For many international students in Australia, finding affordable, adequate and secure housing is an enormous challenge (Berg and Farbenblum 2019; Morris et al. 2021a, b; Obeng-Odoom 2012). The Council of International Students Australia (CISA) and the i-graduate International Student Barometer have 'consistently rated Australia poorly for the quality and cost of student accommodation' (Ziguras 2015, 7). In some years, Australia has been ranked as the world's most expensive host country for international students (HSBC 2013). There is no subsidised student housing, and most students must depend on the high-cost and inadequately regulated private rental sector for accommodation (Morris et al. 2021a, b). These challenges need to be located within neoliberal influences on social and education policy as well as the pro-market housing developments described in the previous section and the intense financialisation of housing in Australia over the last three decades (Jacobs 2019; Morris 2018, 2021). Federal government policy has encouraged significant speculation in residential property, facilitated most explicitly by the highly favourable tax regime for private investors. Negative gearing allows investors to deduct expenses on property (including interest expenses) against their personal income, thereby cutting their tax liability significantly. More crucially, the capital gains tax discount on residential property investment is generous; if an investor sells a property, they are only liable to pay tax on 50% of the profit, provided they have owned the property for longer than a year. As a result, as Madden and Marcuse (2016) argue, housing is seen through the lens of investment rather than shelter.

For international students, the central implication of this kind of financialisation is the need to compete for housing in an expensive, inadequately regulated market. Legislation gives tenants few protections. Once a lease ends, landlords can increase the rent to suit market conditions, free of any mechanisms for rent control. In New South Wales (NSW), the state where Sydney is the capital, no-grounds eviction laws are still in place: when a lease ends tenants are compelled to vacate without a landlord obligation to provide a reason (Morris et al. 2021a, b). The one legal requirement is that tenants are provided with 90 days written notice. In Victoria, whose capital is Melbourne, no-grounds evictions became unlawful at the end of March 2021, except at the end of the first fixed-term agreement (Consumer Affairs Victoria 2021). However, Victorian landlords can still find legitimate grounds to effectively force tenants to vacate. These pro-landlord provisions matter because, as a multi-country study found, private rental markets are more central to the housing arrangements of international students in Australia compared to Canada, Malaysia, the USA, the UK, Hong Kong and Singapore (Burke 2015).

PBSA is a prominent component of Australia's investment regime in relation to international student housing. Local and state governments have facilitated the development of what Garmendia et al. (2012) label 'vertical studentification'; or studentification 'in the staircase community'. Holton and Mouat (2021) recently argued that, in Australian cities PBSA is characterised by developer-led vertical studentification, and in combination with the more traditional 'horizontal studentification', this is beginning to transform neighbourhoods. However, PBSA still constitutes a modest proportion of all the accommodation demanded by students. At the beginning of 2019, there were 87,052 PBSA beds nationwide (Savills 2019), representing around 15% of the accommodation needs of the international student population. Critically, PBSA is provided at market rates—and regardless of whether accommodation is owned by corporations or universities (Ziguras et al. 2020).

The marketised environment means that international students in Australia were particularly vulnerable to housing-related poverty once the pandemic began. During the March to April 2020 national lockdown, in the context of widespread job loss (Berg and Farbenblum 2020), there were increasing reports of student reliance on emergency foodbanks, with some on the verge of homelessness because of difficulties paying rent (Henriques-Gomes 2020; Kinsella 2020; authors, 2021). Many students could not leave the country and return home to family because there were either no outbound flights, or because students' home countries had shut their borders (Barro 2020). Given international students' temporary visa status, they were excluded from the financial assistance measures available to permanent residents, including enhancements in social security coverage and payment levels through a more generous JobSeeker (unemployment benefits) programme boosted by a 'Coronavirus Supplement', plus a wage-subsidy programme called JobKeeper (Ramia and Perrone 2021). However, patchy support from local non-government organisations, state governments and universities helped to ease some of the burden (Hunter 2020), and in the lengthy 2021 lockdowns, the Australian Government eased exclusionary policies and provided the smaller number of remaining students temporary ('disaster') payments (Klapdor and Lotric 2022).

Inaction in Theory: The Literature

Why would governments choose not to take action to address the shortcomings of a market-driven approach to housing? In addressing this, it is helpful to consider that public policy as a subject is about what governments choose to do, or alternatively, *not* to do (Dye 2012). The focus in the policy literature is usually on action, though there have been insights into the political factors which encourage and perpetuate government non-action. In his well-known critique of pluralism, Schattschneider (1960) argued that governments can have 'a bias in favour of the exploitation of some kinds of conflict and the suppression of others'. The suppression translates to governments not acting on certain issues. While '[s]ome issues are organised into politics', others are 'organised out' (Schattschneider 1960, 71; see also: Bachrach and Baratz 1970).

McCalla-Chen (2000) offers additional sources of the mobilisation of bias towards 'non-decision-making', specifically applied to the schools sector in the UK. For her, the role of individuals in the policy process must be considered. There is, for example, a high opportunity cost of individuals taking their concerns to the political arena, and some people may not have appropriate skills or training, while some are conflict averse. Attwell et al. (2021) apply similar reasoning in their analysis of the Italian government's COVID-19 response. They also consider 'policy underreaction', where governments simply do not do enough to fix problems (Maor 2014), while Zahariadis et al. (2021) focus their interpretation of national responses to the pandemic on 'calculated inaction'. Maor (2014, 7–9) used policy underreaction to understand instances when 'policy-makers underestimate increased risk and are predominantly influenced by external constraints'. Included under 'external constraints' are formal institutions, such as courts, legislatures, constitutions, laws and regulations, and informal institutions, such as executive–legislative relations, and ideology and culture. Lack of expertise can also be institutionalised (Bach and Wegrich 2019), with 'blind spots' emerging from the sometimes-negative effects of rational action by policy-makers and bureaucrats. Many of these factors come into play in the current analysis.

Until McConnell and 't Hart's (2019) analysis of 'why policy-makers do nothing', however, there was no systematic model to guide the study of inaction. McConnell and 't Hart (2019, 645) offer a 'typology of forms of inaction' and provide 'detail on core drivers of inaction'. They define policy inaction as 'an instance and/or *a pattern* of non-intervention by individual policy-makers, public organisations, governments or policy networks in relation to an issue within and potentially within their jurisdiction and where other plausible potential policy interventions did not take place' (2019, 648, italics added). This definition resonates in the sphere of international student housing in Australia, given that the inaction has become entrenched over a period of decades, and crosses the partisan divide in Parliament.

McConnell and 't Hart (2019, 649–652) put forward five categories or 'types' of policy inaction. The first is 'calculated' inaction, which is 'deliberate' and 'strategic', and can be of political benefit to governments in the comparative risk-assessment of action and inaction. The second is 'ideological' inaction, which reflects a government's views on the roles and reach of the state in managing societal problems, specifically vis-à-vis individuals and collectives. The third—'imposed' inaction—can result from a lack of policy levers in the face of vetoes and powerful opposition to action; or it can result from 'bureau-political stalemates'. It can be present in 'institutional architectures' (651), including within federalist jurisdictions like Australia. The fourth type is 'reluctant' inaction (651–652), which occurs where there is a paucity of policy options and instruments, or resource shortfalls. The fifth and final type of policy inaction is 'inadvertent' (652), where policy-makers are presented with 'complex information or conflicting signals', typically in unfamiliar situations, and they are led to 'intuitive shortcuts'.

In addition to four types, the model proposes four 'drivers' of inaction. The first is 'individuals' (McConnell and t'Hart 2019, 652–653; see also: McCalla-Chen 2000; Bach and Wegrich 2019). Some policy-makers can be 'unconflicted' in their 'adherence to the status quo', or they can seek to 'bolster decisions already taken'.

Sometimes they seek to shift responsibility for problems or engage in 'buck passing' to other interests, or they might simply engage in 'continued indecision' and 'procrastination'. The second driver is 'public organisations' (653–654), which may process information ineffectively. Alternatively, they may be structured inappropriately and thus be predisposed to inaction. The third driver is governments themselves. The 'actual business of governing', McConnell and 't Hart argue, often 'necessitates continual, dogged policy inaction' (654). This can have ideological sources, in particular political–philosophical questions such as the relationship between the state, society and the individual.

The fourth and final driver of inaction is policy and governance 'networks' (McConnell and 't Hart 2019, 655–656), including 'joined-up' and 'whole-of-government' initiatives, where various agencies and levels of government work together to address policy problems. In general, networks in the realms of policy-making involve 'relationships between government, business and civil society actors' (Klijn 2008, 511). They thus usually also incorporate actors both within and outside the state. The stakeholders interviewed for the current analysis qualify as members of a network. Their presence justifies an assessment of their influence over the substance of policy—or policy inaction—as discussed in the next section.

Methodology

This study is part of a mixed-methods project funded by [source withheld for anonymity] on housing precarity among international students residing in Australia. The project involved a comprehensive programme of survey research and in-depth interviews with international students currently enrolled in tertiary education institutions in the three post-secondary sectors: universities, vocational education and training (VET) institutions, and English language colleges. The central condition for participation was that participants were living in the private rental sector in Sydney or Melbourne, the two most populous cities in Australia and the nation's most significant host locations for international students. The two cities also rank among the world's 'top ten' international student host cities (Dodd 2021).

The study also included twenty in-depth, semi-structured interviews with strategically placed employees within organisations that have a role in the governance of housing and international education. Consistent with Brinkerhoff and Crosby's (2002) conception of 'policy stakeholders', a stakeholder to international student housing is defined as an individual, group or organisation that affects and/or is affected by government policy in the area. Interview participants were purposively sought from across a range of organisational sectors and occupational categories to maximise variation and involvement of participants based in the two Australia states where Sydney and Melbourne are located. Potential interviewees were identified through publicly available, online sources and through snowballing, or recommendations from other interviewees.

As illustrated in Table 1, interviewees were based in four organisational sectors. They were in three occupational categories, and they lived in one of two Australian states. Seven interviewees were from higher education. Six were from

Table 1: Profile of interviewees

Interviewee	Identifier and organisation type	Sector
1.	Legal services organisation	Community
2.	Legal services organisation	Community
3.	University	Higher education
4.	State government agency	Government
5.	Student organisation, university	Higher education
6.	State government agency	Government
7.	Tenants representative organisation	Community
8.	University housing	Higher education
9.	Tenants' service organisation	Community
10.	Public service agency	Government
11.	Student organisation, national level	Higher education
12.	Commercial housing corporation	Corporate (purpose-built housing provider)
13.	Legal services organisation	Community
14.	Public service agency	Government
15.	Student organisation, university	Higher education
16.	Local community organisation	Community
17.	Student organisation, university	Higher education
18.	University	Higher education
19.	Local government agency	Government
20.	Local government agency	Government

the community sector, and six were from the government/public sector. One was in the corporate, purpose-built housing sector. Fourteen interviewees were in managerial or professional roles. One was an 'elite' interviewee, employed in a tribunal that deals with housing issues, including tenants' complaints and appeals. Five were in service provision roles and dealt with international students on housing matters.

All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and analysed using NVivo. A combination of data-driven and concept-driven coding was used in the data analysis. Initial coding included anticipated codes informed by the broader literature, including the code 'framing housing problem', which referred to how stakeholders defined or represented the problem of international student housing but expanded to include sub-coding of 'views on dominant framings'. Inductive codes were generated from the detail of the interview data, allowing for the emergence of unanticipated themes. Lack of non-market-based policy was among the key themes to emerge from the first sweeps of data-driven coding, with substantial overlap with the code 'framing housing problem'. Second-cycle coding explored this theme further with reference to McConnell and 't Hart's (2019) categories and drivers of policy inaction. Interview transcripts were coded by a

single researcher and reviewed by the study leader. The interpretation of interview excerpts through the lens of McConnell and 't Hart's typology was further reviewed collectively by the research team in the process of formulating and drafting the paper.

Data Analysis and Findings

Interviewees' descriptions of international student housing problems echoed the issues identified in the literature discussed above. Affordability was universally viewed as a major issue. The condition of properties was acknowledged as 'hugely variable', but common issues of 'overcrowding, disrepair and lack of privacy' were routinely identified. Interviewees also noted that a scarcity of information contributed to students finding themselves in inadequate accommodation or exploitative situations, particularly when international students were 'completely unfamiliar' with the laws that may protect them. Even in the cases where students were supported to pursue legal redress, some described the lack of regulatory authority to enforce findings of wrongdoing within Civil and Administrative Tribunals. For the many whose professional roles allowed them to engage sufficiently with regulation, there was a perception that regulation was generally inadequate to provide for international student welfare in general, and housing in particular.

Perspectives on policy *inaction* were commonly framed as consistent with market-oriented *action*, promoting a commercial return to investors and provision of housing to students at commercially determined rates. The focus of our data analysis, however, is on how stakeholders characterised the inadequacy or absence of a concerted policy response to these recognised problems.

Drivers: government and education provider neglect

Most of the interviewees felt that governments and education providers were together driving a lack of action to address the problems faced by international students in a market-determined model of housing. The findings provide evidence for McConnell and 't Hart's (2019) 'government-driven' and 'public organisation-driven' categories of inaction.

Government-driven inaction

Most interviewees across sectors identified government as the driver of inaction. A university housing provider most explicitly articulated an absence of policy at all levels of government:

> Is there any policy at the moment? Like honestly, … we don't get any communication from any sort of government giving anything to go by. And I think that maybe states should definitely help out international students who do get exploited (Interviewee 8).

Reflecting more than a need for the federal government to act alone, an interviewee with experience applying the ESOS Framework within provider institutions argued that there was a need for 'collaboration' involving all levels of government—federal, state and local:

> [A]t the state government level, because I think they have a key role to play; and even in the local council area, … and this comes back to collaboration, is how everybody can be working together to ensure that there's … adequate and affordable accommodation. I mean, I've got boxes in my garage of [ESOS-related] reports from over the years, … and the number of times that accommodation has come up, … This is where I get a bit frustrated. It's like with … mental health. I mean, why do we still talk about all these issues that we've been talking about for the last 25 years, because whatever we do, we're not dealing with it adequately. Often we're reinventing the wheel. We're not building on what's happened in the past (Interviewee 3).

A state government employee echoed this point:

> Because often we know that … [international students are] falling through the gaps, so we will … react, … but when things start to improve, they're totally forgotten about, [and] until you hear about them again, they go out again (Interviewee 4).

These stakeholders characterised attention to the housing problems faced by international students as reactive but not substantive.

The pandemic response featured as a prime example of the promise, but also the limits, of government action. Interviewees highlighted the exacerbation of pre-existing problems. The federal government's explicit refusal to provide emergency financial assistance to internationals students was offered as a stark example of the lack of political or ideological appetite to support international students (discussed in more detail below). This stood in contrast to the services provided on an emergency basis (Hunter 2020) by local government, community organisations, universities and state governments, including ad hoc food and financial assistance and, importantly, free accommodation offered by some state governments.

Setting aside the question of whether state-level support was adequate, an interviewee within the Victorian government summarised why assistance in 2020 was not easy to access, placing the blame on the need for international students to negotiate with landlords or estate agents:

> So [a] $76 million fund. It was deliberately extended to be inclusive to international students, but the design of how you get the grants hasn't turned out to work for many renters. So the problem is that … the steps that you were meant to take, to talk to your landlord or property manager about a rent reduction; that's a huge disincentive for many renters, let alone international students. Then you register that agreement with a government entity, Consumer Affairs, and then you make a separate application for the rent relief grant, and you need your landlord to … endorse or verify … [that] that is indeed who you

are and where you're renting. … So the objective was to be very inclusive. For international students, there's information there about how to get a translator. There's an attempt to advertise those grants through international students' … channels. There's been joining in and briefing with the advisors in the various institutions, educational institutions on housing. And yet there's a very low take-up because … [of] the position from which the international students are able to think, 'Now I'm entitled to that', or 'Yes, I'll get on to my landlord and ask them for a rent reduction' … [I]t's a radical misunderstanding, I think, of what an international student feels they're able to do (Interviewee 6).

The example of state-based rental assistance the pandemic reflected this interviewee's broader caution about advocates' calls for law reform to address the lack of policy levers available:

So the rewriting of the law has been the primary thrust, which is all very well, … you do need to have solid legal rights. But it's not much good if a) you don't know of them, or b) when you can find them you don't feel you can exercise them.

This perspective resonates with research that identifies the overriding long-term reliance on the private rental market to provide international student housing (Burke 2015; Morris et al. 2021a, b).

Public organisation-driven inaction

Education providers—all of which in this study were public organisations—were also seen as neglectful. The sense among interviewees was that, if governments do not deliver broadly acceptable results in international student housing, providers must step in. According to one campus-based student service provider, this could be done through provider strategies devised by senior managers:

So when you say universities, there's the people that we deal with who are … sort of your middle management and below, and I think they're working really, really hard, and I think they're very committed to helping students wherever they can. I think the big people in the university aren't doing as much as they could.

Interviewees felt, however, that there was little incentive for educational institutions to substantively address the accommodation issues that international students face. As a community legal services provider commented:

[F]or the most part, universities turn a bit of a blind eye; a little bit similar to sexual assault on campus. It's known about, but not necessarily spoken about, and then all of a sudden it becomes the main focus, and changes [are] put in place. And I think that's probably what needs to happen with this [international student housing] (Interviewee 13).

Consistent with that position, another interviewee, who has worked extensively within universities on their compliance with the formal regulatory framework,

pointed out that accommodation is not included in the remit of education providers under the ESOS Framework:

> Standard 6 [of the Code] does cover … overseas student support services, so it says that the provider should make available support services, and it makes no specific mention of accommodation at all. It just says that the registered provider must support overseas students in adjusting to study in life in Australia, by giving the overseas students information on, or access to, age and culturally appropriate orientation programs that provide [relevant] information … So likewise, … if there was to be something … [in] the National Code that put more of a responsibility on to the institutions to be more [proactive], to provide more services (Interviewee 3).

Here, inaction on the part of education providers is seen to flow from the standards—or lack of them—established by the federal government through the National Code.

Types: Inadvertent or ideological neglect?

While most stakeholders attributed inaction on international student housing to federal government and education providers, perspectives of the *type* of inaction were more mixed. However, there was a common view—as best summarised by a community legal services provider—that international student accommodation is 'not looked at as it ought to be looked at'. McConnell and 't Hart (2019) account for ways of seeing or not seeing policy problems in terms of *inadvertent* and *ideological* inaction. Inaction is inadvertent when it arises from cultural biases and blind spots that shape how or whether phenomenon is seen (650). They classify ideological inaction as a more 'purposeful' stance about who is responsible for problem-solving (651). Importantly, there was no consensus among our interviewees about whether neglect on the part of government and education providers was explicitly ideological or more inadvertent.

Many interviewees attributed inaction on international student housing problems as arising from financialisation of housing and higher education. A lawyer in community services suggested that education providers were motivated by a market-driven concern to maintain reputation:

> Because they won't want to be seen to be doing the wrong thing, but for the most part—and this is where most of what is happening with institutions at the moment isn't out there—they're focusing on the positive stuff. They're not actually focusing on the real stories of what students are going through at the moment (Interviewee 13).

Global reputation building is one of the main objectives of the ESOS Framework (DESE 2018, 2021). When the core internationalisation strategy is increasing revenue through international student fees, addressing the negative experiences of already-enrolled students sits in conflict with the positive image that institutions present to the outside world; one designed to appear attractive to prospective students.

Emphasising positives as a marketing strategy implies a degree of conscious strategy in not acting.

A number of interviewees pointed to the market ideology permeating the overall approach to international education. Several interviewees argued for the need to reframe the approach, from 'using international students as a tool to make money', to foregrounding international student welfare. In the words of interviewees from the community legal services sector and local government:

> What I see, when I see a[n international student] client … sitting before me, is a person whose rights have been removed from them. The government and perhaps universities … look at them, and perhaps there's a little bit of a dollar sign that's printed on their clothing or above their head (Interviewee 13).

An interviewee who provides legal advice to international students with respect to housing suggested that efforts to address housing supply and quality through private-sector investment (Ziguras et al. 2020) were undermined by prioritising profit. He argued that quality accommodation 'shouldn't be something that is just available to those who have deep pockets', and that PBSA was a missed opportunity to stop students being 'ripped off':

> I don't think that [accommodation] should always be driven by the bottom line. It's about improving people's lives and also improving the experience and also that ambassadorship that then goes with it thereafter (Interviewee 13).

Market logic casts international students as bearers of consumer rights rather than social rights, effectively absolving governments and providers of responsibility for protecting students against failures in the market. While McConnell and 't Hart (2019) categorise ideological inaction as a decisive political stance, it was unclear whether interviewees in our study saw the prevailing market-driven ideology in terms of conscious politics or a more taken-for-granted worldview.

A recurring theme was how *definitions* of international student well-being, and the relationship between accommodation and well-being, shape perceived responsibilities. For example, one interviewee with extensive experience in administering ESOS compliance, raised the issue of whether providers view accommodation as a fundamental part of the student experience, or as somehow external to it:

> But I think it also depends on how an institution views accommodation, 'cos I think some have been fairly good. They've been very proactive and actually building accommodation and offering accommodation services […] It'd be interesting [to see] how important is accommodation to the package of what an institution offers to a student… (Interviewee 3).

Another, a state government representative, argued that both providers and government need a more wholistic understanding of what they are offering international students beyond the strictly campus-based experience, and their degree:

> [W]hen we talk about accommodation, we should, every international student who comes to Australia should, … to put it in the parents' perspective – the parents should be confident [that] any international students who come to Aus-

tralia would … have access to a decent, safe environment to reside, work and socialise in (Interviewee 4).

Hesitancy to use the word 'entitled' here speaks to the prevailing framing of international students as bearers of consumer rights, but not social rights (DESE 2018, 2021). The implication was that accommodation is typically understood as lying outside of what education providers are incentivised to deliver. This partly explains the lack of action when housing problems arise.

Some interviewees indicated that international students are not typically seen as a vulnerable population. For one participant with longstanding and cross-sectoral experience in international education, including ESOS administration, the source of the government's inaction was the repeated high overall satisfaction rates in international student surveys on the overall experience of life in Australia:

> [T]he government will always come back to the ISB [International Student Barometer]. … [S]tudents are always 87 percent satisfied with their experience, … so they [governmental authorities] think, "Well, they're satisfied with their experience. What do we have to do? We don't have to worry about those few students that are not happy" (Interviewee 3).

For that interviewee, the small proportion (typically at or around fifteen per cent) of students who were less than satisfied—who were, after all, studying in one of the world's most significant international education host countries—represented a very significant minority. From this perspective, the lack of attention reflects a calculated decision to prioritise the experiences of the majority.

In relation to the federal government's inaction at the outbreak of the pandemic in 2020, interviewees emphasised that government either *did not see* or *turned away* from evidence of international student hardship. A minority of interviewees characterised it as a blind spot resulting from international students not typically being seen as vulnerable. A state government representative described international students as an 'afterthought':

> [I]t was almost like we don't have to think about that or worry about that [international students remaining onshore during the pandemic, with little assistance]. So, the general thing … is just international students being thought of as some sort of, if at all, as an afterthought, or somehow able to put up with more things or a unique case with unique resources (Interviewee 6).

A community organiser similarly described international students as 'forgotten' in the early crisis response:

> The easiest to forget about is the one who is lowest on the so-called ladder […] while we were working with international students in March [2020], literally no one was because international students were no one's cohort from a community organisation's perspective.

This quote suggests some ambivalence about whether international students were 'forgotten' because they were not considered vulnerable or because they were socially devalued.

However, most interviewees described the Australian response as a decisive abandonment of international students. As another state government representative in a different state reflected, 'when COVID-19 hit, the first thing the Prime Minister said was to … [say], go back if you can't support yourself'. The refusal was particularly significant when it is considered that permanent residents—including domestic students studying the same courses as their international peers—were provided with an unprecedented package of generous, albeit temporary, welfare measures (Ramia and Perrone 2021). The federal government's response could be interpreted as a conscious continuation its long-held approach to international students as customers, who are implicitly deemed as capable of supporting themselves. However, given that its emergency response otherwise constituted a significant break from government business as usual, the exclusion of international students also reads as a resolute ideological stance on international students' relationship to the nation.

Understanding Inaction: Conclusion and Implications

McConnell and 't Hart's (2019) model of inaction draws attention to how governmental responsibility is defined and disputed. This resonated with our analysis of stakeholder perspectives. Our interviewees commonly characterised government and education provider action to address the housing problems international students face as inadequate or absent. There was acute awareness that successive governments and education providers have viewed international students mainly as market subjects within financialised housing and higher education models. However, views were mixed on whether policy neglect was explicitly ideological or more inadvertent. This is not surprising given that, as McConnell and 't Hart (2019, 649) qualify, 'the portrayal of inaction as calculated, reluctant or inadvertent is often a contestable issue, rather than a matter of unambiguous fact'.

The framing of drivers of inaction as either *not seeing* or *turning away* has implications for how stakeholders act. There was some suggestion that government and education providers needed to be made aware of the housing problems experienced by international students. However, interviewees more commonly expressed frustration that the same issues were being repeatedly raised without resulting in policy action. Criticism of 'talk fests […] but nothing substantial' implemented [Interviewee 4] connects with the argument that governments can use policy-related activity—as distinct from substantive action—as a proxy or a cover for policy-making (Barber, 2016). In general, interviewees saw the absence of active policy decision-making in their sphere in terms of 'agenda denial' (Cobb and Ross 1997), which is consistent with the predominant market basis of action. This perspective suggests a lack of political appetite for policy, rather than lack of awareness of the problems. From this vantage point, stakeholders can attempt to convince or pressure governments to act. While stakeholders can and do provide services to remedy the failures of the market, only government can provide an overriding policy and legal framework to cut out exploitation in housing.

Our analysis also foregrounds the relationship between policy action and inaction. As stakeholder responses showed, the role of market-driven action is relevant

to how inaction is framed and understood. Successive governments have actively encouraged self-provision in legislation for international students and, equally, facilitated commercial investment in student housing. In turn, the failures of this market-driven approach are devolved to students, and realised often through hardship. For the students themselves, and for stakeholders, these problems are experienced and understood as government inaction. This was especially so when governments refused to make even minor concessions to severe pandemic hardship. We highlight the potential for inaction to be the product of action elsewhere, a process of displacement not corrected by policy-makers for either ideological reasons or a failure to perceive the extent of the problem. How policy-making 'action' that relies on one, path-dependent approach—in this case, the neoliberal, financialised construction of student housing—emerges as 'inaction' for other stakeholders is an important future consideration for the theory of policy inaction.

The primary policy implication of our analysis is that governments need to respond to stakeholders and to actively encourage their input into policy formation, even and especially if this means widening the scope of action (and reducing inaction). Such a response would mean government policy extends beyond an ideological reliance on market-friendly solutions as identified in legislation and housing policy. Interviewees generally suggested this without equivocation. Their prescriptions included the recommendation for action in a wide range of spheres, from the ESOS Framework to housing tribunals, to the more obvious acts of criminality on the part of landlords and scammers. Analyses of the ESOS Framework and the wider policy regime on international student welfare, of which housing is a part, recommend more transparent and explicit action. Transparency ought to compel the government and education institutions to be more open in the marketing of Australia as a study destination to prospective students (Ramia 2017; Marginson et al. 2010). This was identified as a problem by participants, and in what is known in practice about differences between housing information in marketing, and housing experience (Morris et al. 2020). Greater recognition of this problem would aid stakeholders in the provision of assistance and advice to international students.

Declarations

Conflict of interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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Authors and Affiliations

Gaby Ramia[1] · **Emma Mitchell[2]** · **Alan Morris[3]** · **Shaun Wilson[4]** · **Catherine Hastings[3]** · **Jake Davies[1]**

Emma Mitchell
e.mitchell@westernsydney.edu.au

Alan Morris
Alan.Morris@uts.edu.au

Shaun Wilson
shaunwilson71@gmail.com

Catherine Hastings
Catherine.Hastings@uts.edu.au

Jake Davies
jdav6845@uni.sydney.edu.au

[1] The University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia

[2] Western Sydney University, Sydney, Australia

[3] University of Technology Sydney, Ultimo, Australia

[4] Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia