Addressing international students on Australian and Chinese university webpages: A comparative study

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the discursive construction of international students on Australian and Chinese university webpages that are directed at international students. The international student theme webpages of three Australian and three Chinese universities were examined in relation to how verbal and visual semiotic resources were co-deployed on the webpages to address international students in the climate of neoliberal thinking in higher education. The tools used for analysis and interpretation were informed by socio-semiotic approaches to multimodal discourse analysis, international education discourses and communication accommodation theories. It was found that the Australian and Chinese university webpages differed in several salient ways to the effect that international students were portrayed as agentive and informed individuals to explore a study abroad experience at the Australian universities versus being explicitly guided through their study abroad at the Chinese universities. These results were compared and interpreted as reflecting each country's conception of transnational education. The article concludes with a summary of the impacts of cultural and intercultural factors and neoliberal thinking in higher education on multimodal representations of international students on university webpages and directions for further research.

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1. Introduction

University webpages as multimodal texts have received increasing research attention. Research indicates that universities revamp their homepages continually through motivated choices of linguistic resources (verbals) and other semiotic resources such as images (visuals) to serve their branding and identity building needs (e.g., O'Halloran et al., 2015; Zhang and O'Halloran, 2013). Studies also attend to the impact of culture on the production of university webpages (e.g., Tomášková, 2015; Zhang and O'Halloran, 2012). What seems to be underreported is research that focuses on university webpages specifically directed at international students, in particular how international students are addressed and represented on these webpages. Such research is highly relevant to the onging discussion of goals and models of international student education in the neoliberal climate of marketisation of universities and internationalisation of higher education (e.g., Marginson, 2010, 2013; Rizvi, 2011; Bessant et al., 2015; Yang, 2016; Knight and de Wit, 2018; Tight, 2019; Mogaji et al., 2020). There is also the added value of investigating such

webpages from intercultural communication perspectives as they are presumably produced for consumption by culturally different audiences.

This study is an attempt in this direction by focusing on Chinese and Australian universities addressing international students on their international student theme webpages. China and Australia appear to have different goals for international student education. Australia, a traditionally strong player in international student education, has viewed international student education as a service export (Australian Government, 2016). For China, international student education, in particular through its various scholarship programmes, aims to "generate a large number of graduates who both understand China and contribute to connecting China to the rest of the world" (China Scholarship Council, 2012, p. 1) and "promote mutual understanding, cooperation and exchanges in various fields between China and other countries" (China Scholarship Council, 2016, p. 1).

This study looks at the ways Australian and Chinese universities represent international students on the theme pages for these students to illustrate the impacts of cultural and intercultural factors on discursive practices. It will also provide valuable clues to the two different cultures' conception of international student education in response to the current neoliberal thinking about university marketisation and internationalisation. This study is guided by the following two research questions:

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(1) How do universities in Australia and China address and represent international students on their international student webpages?

(2) How may any major similarities and differences in the multimodal theme page for international students be accounted for from cultural and intercultural perspectives in the climate of neoliberal thinking about international education?

2. Literature review

This section presents our review of studies that inform our research into the theme page for international students on university websites, including the discussion of the affordances of webpages and approaches to studying webpages as multimodal and intercultural communication.

2.1. Affordances of webpages

Webpages are a complex artefact for discourse analysis. While they are discussed as an (emerging) cyber genre in a number of studies (e.g., Weare and Lin, 2000; Tomášková, 2015), others contend that webpages are too complex a medium to be readily assigned the label of genre (e.g., Bateman, 2008; Bateman et al., 2017). For example, in their critique of taking homepages as a genre, Bateman et al. (2017, p. 348) argue that "it is still often unclear just how many of the properties of those pages are due to some genre of 'homepages', or to the properties of webpages as such, or to conventions that have arisen in the use of webpages that are totally independent of the functions of 'homepages' … or are consequences of limitations arising from the technology used." This debate around webpages in the light of a medium or a proper genre boils down to the fluidity of features on webpages, which are susceptible to technological advances, and the need for researchers to interpret these features in relation to a specific webpage's purpose and context of production and consumption (Bateman, 2008; Mautner, 2005). As the principal aim of this article is to explore how universities address and represent international students on the theme page for these students, we are inclined to view the webpage as a medium which affords the co-deployment of a range of semiotic resources for meaning making, while also recognising the potential of a genre approach to multimodal discourses such as webpages (see for example Feng, 2019; Teo and Ren, 2019).

2.2. Analysing webpages as intercultural communication

As university webpages for international students address a diverse range of target viewers, some of whom are from distinct cultural backgrounds, the webpages may be expected to reflect intercultural communication strategies. Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) is useful for understanding webpages for international students from an intercultural communication perspective. CAT, which is developed on the basis of Giles' speech accommodation theory (Giles et al., 1991; Giles and Ogay, 2007), explains the way human communicators adjust their behaviour, including language, in line with their perception of the context and their fellow communicator. Convergence and divergence are two key strategies communicators may take up to achieve solidarity or maintain difference as they perceive to be appropriate in their communication context. For example, given that English is the lingua franca, or standard language, for international communication and education (Meierkord, 2013; Jenkins, 2014), using it on university webpages targeting international students may be viewed as the convergence strategy in use. A recent study of Australian university theme webpages for international students (Zhang and Tu, 2019) shows Australian universities' approaches to converging to their international students, for example, by providing recruitment information in their prospective students' home languages such as Chinese, Vietnamese and Arabic or describing the university's connections with the students' regions in addition to transmitting the same information in English.

Accommodation in intercultural communication is a challenging undertaking. Sociocultural factors are found to complicate the use of convergence and divergence in intercultural communication. For example, in a study of the intercultural negotiation between American and Chinese negotiators (Liu, 2018), cultural attributes such as power distance and negotiator status (e.g., employee versus employer) are found to impact on the way the intercultural communicators converged to or diverged from each other in their situated interaction. This insight is resonant with research for university webpages. Semiotic resources including the visuals and verbals deployed on webpages are attributable to cultural practices, rules and norms. For example, a comparative study of the National University of Singapore's and Tsinghua University's homepage (Zhang and O'Halloran, 2012) demonstrates the enabling and constraining effect of the sociocultural context. The study argues, for example, that the linguistic features of four-character phrasing, frequent use of the university name in phrases and clauses, and little use of visuals on Tsinghua University's homepage can be attributed to the high-context culture of China where meaning is assumed rather than negotiated. In contrast, the National University of Singapore, which is argued by the authors to be functioning in a low-context culture, was shown to deploy varied linguistic phrasing, photographs of students on campus, and multiple reading paths to present an explicit message of the university's identity and student life and to cater for a diverse range of potential viewers. Tomášková's (2015) study of the university webpages of Harvard University, the University of Oxford and Charles University in Prague suggests several salient differences between the Anglo-American universities and the Czech university, in particular regarding the use of visuals and interpersonal elements on the webpages for promotional purposes. The study suggests that these differences can be traced to Charles University's response to advances in Internet technology and the university's emerging awareness of audience and market forces in the Czech sociocultural context. The visuals and verbals may thus be regarded as indexical devices for the social meanings inherent in the cultural practices, rules and norms. According to Bucholtz and Hall (2005, p. 598), various indexical processes including "labeling, implicature, stance taking, style marking, and code choice" through indexical devices provide for understandings of social meanings constructed in interaction. Accordingly, the use of such indexical devices in the university theme webpages for international students could offer clues to universities' ways of accommodating international students in the theme page as an intercultural communication space.

This intercultural communication space is further complicated by the current trend of neoliberal thinking in higher education across the globe. Neoliberalism originated in the 1980s as an economic thinking which has since spilled over to many sectors including higher education (Tight, 2019). Neoliberal thinking in higher education treats higher education as a marketplace where universities become corporate entities competing with each other for a larger market share through marketisation and corporate models of management. In this thinking, students are constructed as clients who take responsibilities for their choices of education providers and experiences through university (Gottschall and Saltmarsh, 2017; Ng, 2018; Lomer et al., 2018; Lewin-Jones, 2019). Neoliberal thinking has also made noticeable impacts on the higher education sector in China (e.g., Teo and Ren, 2019; Feng, 2019). Nonetheless, researchers (e.g., Marginson, 2010; Yang, 2016; Ma and Zhao, 2018) draw attention to the characteristics of international student education in China, including the rationale and the government's role in the provision of international student education. Consequently, discussions of discursive practices in intercultural communication spaces like the university theme pages for international students need to factor in neoliberal thinking about interational

student education. Verbal and visual features on the webpages may index neoliberal ideas and practices.

2.3. Approaches to analysing webpages as multimodal communication

Various approaches have been developed for analysing webpages from a multimodal, social semiotic perspective (e.g., Djonov and Knox, 2014; O'Halloran, 2008; Pauwels, 2012). These approaches build on the theoretical foundations provided by Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), or, more broadly, Systemic Functional Theory (SFT) (e.g., Halliday, 1978, 1985, 1994; Halliday and Matthiessen, 2014). In SFT, language and other semiotic systems are structured to make three kinds of meanings or metafunctions simultaneously: (a) ideational meaning, which has two aspects: experiential meaning for construing our experience and knowledge of the world and logical meaning for making connections in that world; (b) interpersonal meaning for enacting social relations and expressing attitudes; and (c) textual meaning for organising meanings into coherent messages. From an SFT perspective, ideational meaning is realised through verbal resources that may include words, phrases, clauses and blocks of linguistic texts. Clauses can be analysed with reference to the processes (i.e. the type of process realised by the verb: e.g., material, relational, verbal, mental, behavioural and existential), participants (the entities involved in the processes), and circumstances (the time, place and manner of processes realised by prepositional phrases and adverbs). Interpersonal meaning may be realised through speech functions (statement, offer, command and question), the mood systems and appraisal systems (e.g., Martin and Rose, 2007). Textual meaning is realised through systems of theme, information flow and cohesion. Ideational, interpersonal and textual meanings may also be realised through visual sources including layout, font, colour, shot angle, shot distance, visual address (e.g., Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006; O'Halloran et al., 2015; O'Toole, 2011). The metafunctional principle plays an important role in determining the functionalities and underlying organisation of semiotic resources, and for investigating the ways in which semiotic choices combine and interact to create meaning in multimodal texts. O'Halloran, 2008) shows, for example, how multiple modes (visuals and verbals) combine in making meaning in a multimodal text and how technology can assist in identifying the meanings through each mode and through the combinations. Her study suggests that one mode may trigger, complement or enhance the meaning that is expressed in another mode.

Several major studies of university webpages demonstrate the power of a multimodal, social semiotic perspective for understanding multimodal discursive practices. O'Halloran et al., 2015; Zhang and O'Halloran, 2013) have shown, for example, that the National University of Singapore and Curtin University in Australia updated their respective websites periodically to align with their changing missions and vision statements and to promote themselves as the university of choice for future students. Visual resources such as images, colouring, framing, font and verbal resources such as linguistic clauses and phrases were, in their view, used for achieving varied promotional purposes.

The specific approach to webpage analysis developed by Djonov and Knox (2014) is practically helpful to our own study. Their approach begins with an analysis of the purpose the webpage serves. It then focuses on the navigation zones and content zones of the webpage to explore the content categorisation and logical-semantic relations, interpersonal meanings that are created through the visuals and verbals and the textual meanings, and concludes with relating the deployment of the multimodal features to the sociocultural context for interpreting the meaning the webpage constructs. This approach also emphasises looking into the verbals and visuals by themselves and the interplay between them. They also caution that researchers need to have the field

knowledge of the webpage, for example, knowledge of university operations when analysing university webpages, and technology design knowledge to interpret the webpages. Informed by this approach and other studies in the literature review, we examine the visuals (images) and verbals (linguistic texts) on the theme webpages of three Chinese and three Australian university websites from a multimodal, social semiotic SFT perspective, and then interpret them by referring to cultural and sociocultural factors at work.

3. Materials and methods

3.1. Data

The data used for this study were the webpages aimed at international students from six universities, including Peking University (PKU), the University of International Business and Economics (UIBE) and Ningxia University (NU) in China and the University of Sydney (USyD), the Australian National University (ANU) and the University of New England (UNE) in Australia. Each university represents a different type of university within its respective country. PKU is the top university in China's capital city with a long history and tradition of educating international students. UIBE is a prestigious university also located in the country's capital city and known for its research and teaching in international business and economics. Approximately one fifth of its student population is from overseas. NU is a well-respected university in a regional area in China with a small percentage of international students on campus (approximately 1% of the total student population). Of the three Australian universities, USyD is the oldest in Australia and is located in Australia's largest city with international students accounting for 22.6% of its total student population (Australia University Rankings (AUR), 2020). ANU is self-proclaimed to be the country's leading university with 26.6% of its students being international (AUR, 2020). UNE is located in a university town in regional Australia with a relatively small percentage of international students (5.2% according to the AUR, 2020). The universities of each country thus allow a cross-section view of each university's, and perhaps each country's, conception of international students and approach to international student education.

All six universities were found to have one international student theme page which was accessed by following the navigation tabs on each university's homepage (for detail of the paths to reaching the theme page, see Zhang and Tu, 2019). The webpages were captured through the free data capturing software "Full Page Screen Capture" (accessible from https://www.crx4chrome.com /extensions/fdpohaocae chififmbbbbbknoalclacl/#description) from the six universities' official websites on the 13th June 2018 and the 21st November 2018 for the Australian and Chinese universities respectively. The Chinese universities all had alternating images between their top navigation bar and the content zone. USyD had two videos, one featuring the whole university journey and the other the procedure for university application, as part of the content zone. Elements of the webpages are illustrated in Fig. 1 Section 4.

3.2. Methods of data analysis

By drawing on multimodal analysis from an SFT perspective, communication accommodation and webpage analysis, we developed a set of codes to annotate the webpages. Following the procedure in Djonov and Knox (2014), we examined the navigation zones and the content zone on the theme pages although we also referred to Halliday (1994) and Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) in the analysis of verbals and visuals. For example, we first paid attention to the navigation zones, including the layers of the navigation zones, the content the navigation tabs led to and the categorisation of the content. We then focused on the content zone by identifying the clauses in the verbals to examine the roles assigned to international students in the represented
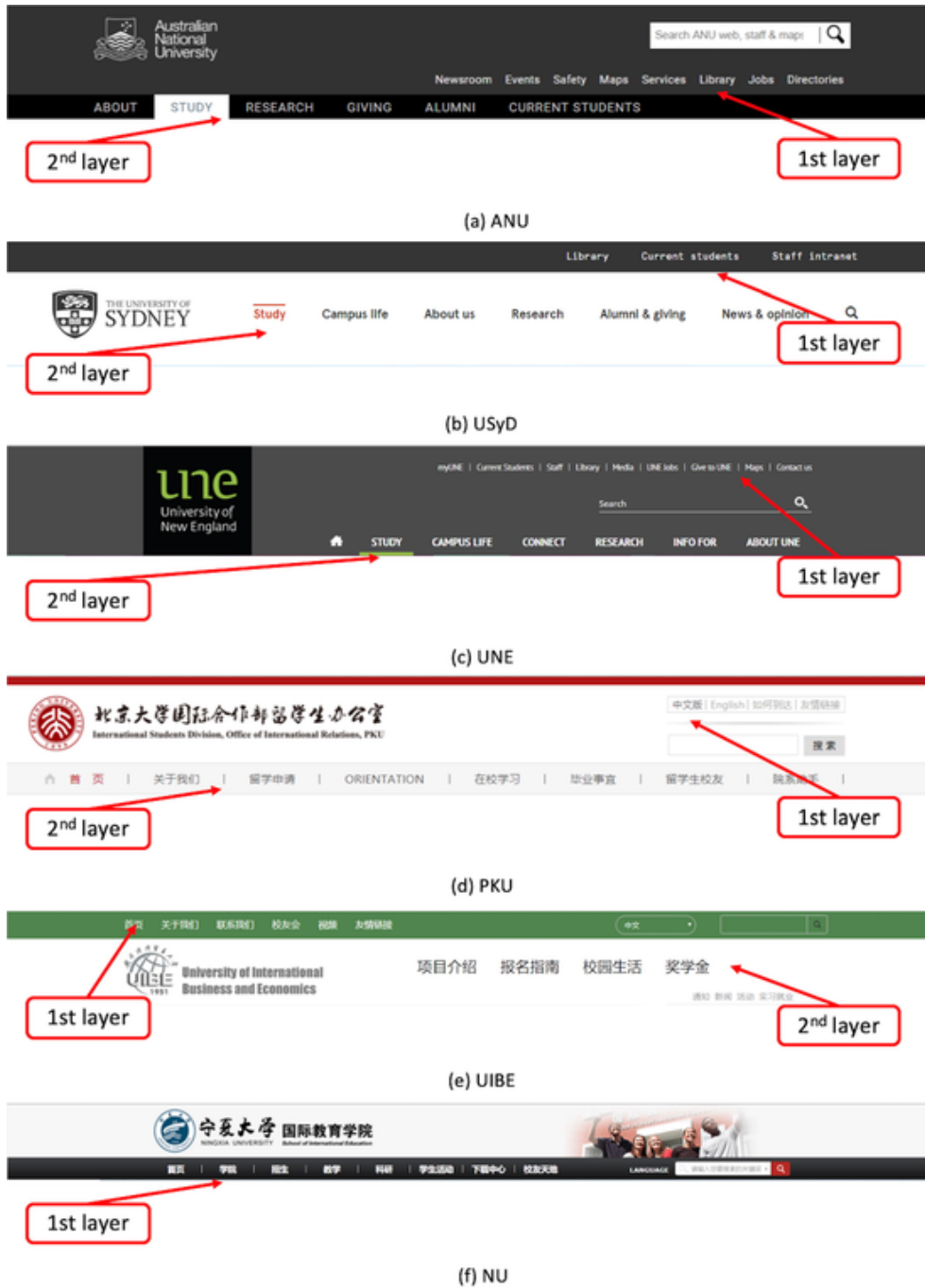
Fig. 1. (a-f) Layers of navigation zones on university theme pages.

experiences in the various types of clauses. We also attended to the visuals by examining what is represented for target viewers to view, including what the participants in the visuals are doing and how they interact with each other within the visuals, together with what target viewers are invited to do with the visuals. Through scrutinising the visuals with reference to the types of images (images featuring human beings or inanimate objects, environment), the angles the images were shot (e.g., frontal versus oblique, high angle versus eyelevel and low angles), gaze (e.g., direct address indicating interaction between the human participant in the image and the viewer versus indirect address that situates the viewer as an observer), social distance (e.g., long shot versus medium and close shot), we were able to identify what roles each university was constructing for their international students. The

interplay between the verbals and the visuals on the webpages was also examined, by extending Peirce's (1931–1958) discussion of signs, for example, whether the verbals and visuals are in an indexical relation (i.e. verbals in tandem with visuals where the link between the two is not immediately transparent but interpretable through experience), iconic (verbals and visuals mutually reflecting each other and immediately accessible), and symbolic (the link between verbals and visuals are based on conventions known to cultural in-group).

We then zoomed in on the choice of languages and other features on each university's webpages that gave us clues to communication accommodation (Giles and Ogay, 2007). This coding of communication accommodation, coupled with the coding of the clauses and images outlined above, allowed us to identify the verbal and visual choices the

universities made to address and represent international students. These choices were interpreted with reference to cultural and sociocultural practices and neoliberal thinking about higher education reviewed in Section 2.2 (e.g., Tight, 2019). The results of the analysis are reported and discussed where appropriate in the next section.

To ensure the reliability of data coding and analysis, the first author and the second author each coded the six universities' theme pages for international students. The Chinese university theme pages were analysed in the original Chinese version by the first author, who also translated the Chinese data into English, with a literal translation and free translation, which was used by the second author to verify the first author's analysis. In both cases, they organised video conferences to discuss the coding and any discrepancies. For example, there were nine out of 131 clauses on the Australian university theme pages which were coded slightly differently in transitivity analysis by the two authors. They reviewed the coding per the coding criteria and eventually agreed on the coding which was tallied for analysis.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Information and categorisation of information in the navigation zones

Navigation zones provide information on the types of information the webpage or the whole website contains and signpost the structural organisation of the information. The information and its categorisation reflect the institution's structuring of the world/reality (Djonov and Knox, 2014). The Australian and Chinese university webpages offered multiple layered navigation zones, which is an indication that both the Australian and Chinese universities offered freedom of navigation on their webpages. Nonetheless, notable differences can be identified between the Australian and Chinese universities in the form and content of their navigation zones.

For example, as Fig. 1 shows, on the Australian university webpages, the first layer of the navigation zones generally includes tabs for staff, students, library and maps, while the second layer mainly features drop-down menus for major university operations such as study, research and alumni. The first layer is backgrounded, as it is presented in a smaller font and positioned closer to the very top of the webpages. The second layer is in a larger font and closer to the content zone, which indicates that the information in this layer is foregrounded. These two layers were also shared across the university websites. In contrast, the Chinese university theme pages for international students were owned by the seemingly self-contained International College. The first layer of the Chinese navigation zones tended to provide tabs for different language versions to choose from and information pertaining to the location of the College. The second layer, in a larger font than for the first layer, generally included drop-down menus for academic programmes, admissions and campus life. This structural difference on the Australian and Chinese university webpages creates the impression that at the Australian universities, international students were part of the student body while at the Chinese universities, international students were kept together and apart from the rest of the university.

It is unsurprising that the Chinese and Australian navigation zones shared certain drop-down menus featuring students' academic journey through the university including application to academic programmes, on-campus study, graduation and study support. What is worth noting is that these features were foregrounded through a larger font and prime positioning on the webpage, in particular in the case of the Australian universities. The traditional role of university, for example, producing and curating knowledge, and the key players on campus such as the library, students and staff, were backgrounded in the first layer through a smaller font and less prominent positioning on all three Australian university theme pages. This practice may well reflect the neoliberal thinking in which the student experience at university is high-

lighted rather than academic scholarship (Gottschall and Saltmarsh, 2017; Zhang and O'Halloran, 2013).

4.2. Representation of international students' study abroad experience

The analysis of the verbals and visuals and the interplay between these semiotic resources, mainly in the content zones, shows that different views of international students were constructed on the Australian and Chinese university theme pages. The salient aspects of these constructions are presented in the following three Sections 4.2.1–4.2.3 and finally discussed in Section 4.2.4.

4.2.1. International students construed in agentive versus non-agentive role in clauses

The clauses on the university webpages indicate whether international students were allowed to initiate an experience in the represented world and to interact or just be recipients of information. In a clause where international students are constructed linguistically as actor, senser, sayer, carrier or behaver, they are presented as initiating an experience and taking agentive roles, whereas in clauses where there is no negotiation open for them, as in clauses where they are represented as a qualifier in nominal groups (Halliday, 1994) or assigned a beneficiary or no explicit role, they are treated as non-agentive. Clauses in the form of statement construct international students as recipients of information while clauses in the form of imperative or question give international students the opportunity to participate interactively in the dyad between them and the university. Fig. 2 summarises the results of the analysis of the roles international students are assigned in the clauses. Fig. 3 shows the speech functions of the clauses on the six universities' theme pages for international students.

As is shown in Fig. 2, there are intracultural variations, that is, differences within the Australian and Chinese universities. Intercultural variations are more striking. The Australian universities tended to allow international students to initiate an experience by linguistically presenting them as actor, sayer, senser or carrier. For example, international students were represented as participating in a range of experiences at university and more importantly were assigned agentive roles in the clauses as the actor (e.g., international students securing their future by choosing to study with ANU and USyD, or immersing themselves through connecting, sharing and engaging at UNE), or constructed as the senser (e.g., international students deciding on their study destination at USyD):

> 'Secure your future with Australia's leading university.' [ANU]
> 'Deciding to study in Australia secures you a globally recognised education, access to world-class facilities, and memorable student experiences.' [USyD]
> 'Connect, share, engage' [UNE]

On the Chinese university webpages, international students who participated in the events or were involved in these events were not foregrounded or given agentive roles in the verbal representation of the events or activities but were typically featured as qualifier in the nominal groups constituting the clauses or put into the causative structure with their college or teacher as the actor, as shown on the NU and UIBE theme pages for international students respectively:

> "2018?????????????????????????" [The opening ceremony for international students of the 2018 fall semester and orientation for new students have taken place as a success]. [NU]
> "?????????????????" [The International College has organised for international students from the Dominican Republic to experience cultural exchanges]. [UIBE]

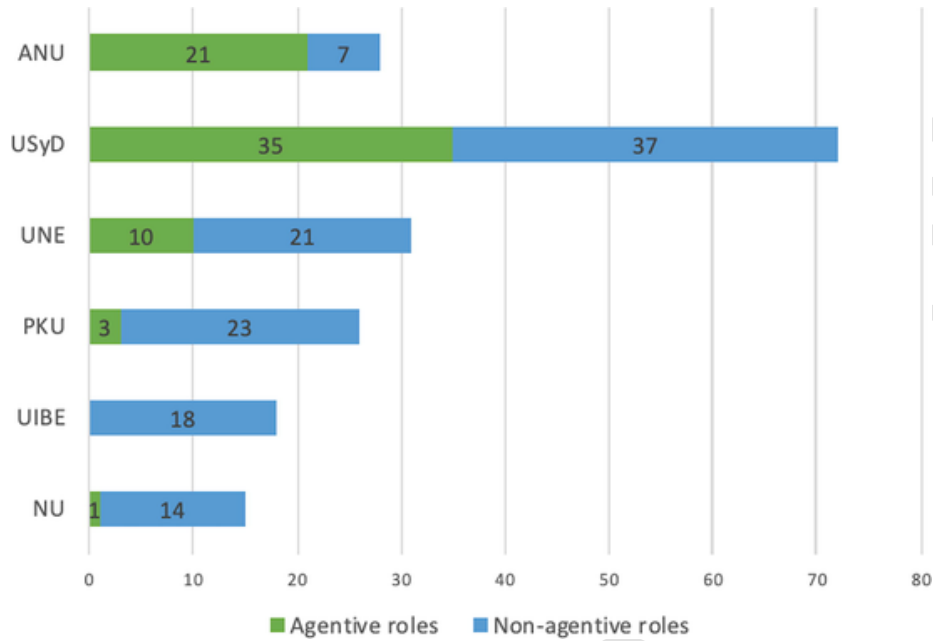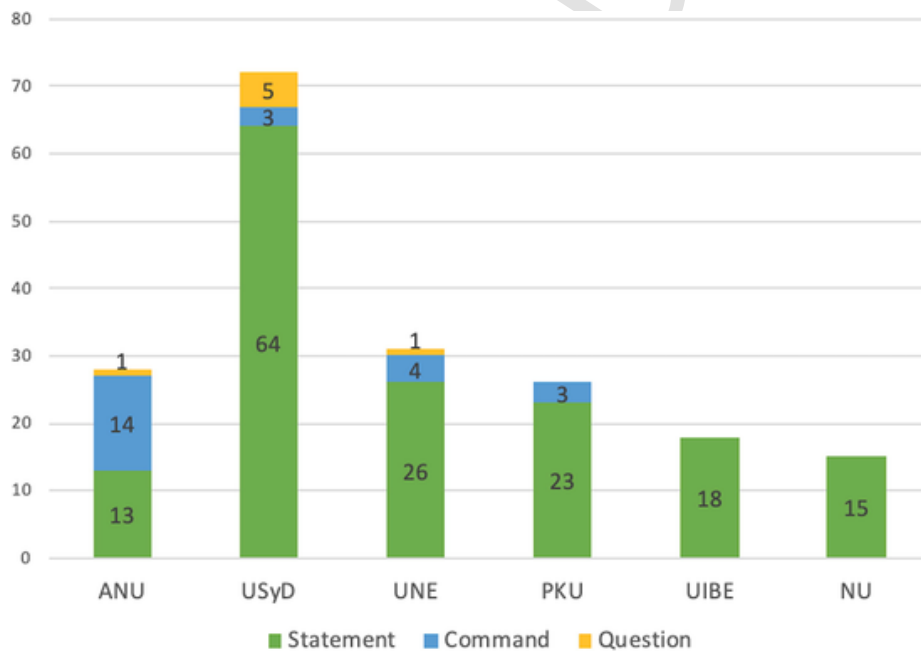**Fig. 2.** Number of clauses with international students in agentive vs non-agentice roles.

Fig. 3. Number of clauses performing different speech functions.

Where the speech functions of the clauses are concerned (see Fig. 3), international students on the Chinese university webpages were largely presented in the role of receiving information as they were given statements to read in most of the clauses (e.g., 23 out of 26 clauses for PKU), but on the Australian university webpages international students were given the opportunity to respond to commands and questions (e.g., one question, 14 commands and 13 statements for ANU). Arguably, the Chinese universities played an information-giving role while the Australian universities encouraged an interaction with international students. This echoes the earlier obversation based on the roles construed for international students in the clauses: International students are represented as less agentive and dynamic on the Chinese university theme pages than on the Australian university theme pages.

The differences between the Chinese and Australian universities in the assignment of agentive versus non-agentive roles and speech functions were also found to be statistically significant. The Fisher's Exact Test through the SPSS indicates that the Australian universities were significantly higher than the Chinese universities in assigning agentive roles to their international students and providing them opportunities to interact with the universities ($p < 0.001$ and $p = 0.014$ respectively). This finding should be read with the caution that the kinds of verbals on the Chinese university webpages were mainly *tongzhi* (announcements), *gonggao* (public notices), *xinwen* (news) in the content zones and only the news headlines or lead on the webpages were analysed, while the Australian university webpages mainly consisted of blocks of expository texts.

4.2.2. International students construed in a professionally egalitarian versus hierarchical relation with the university

A total of nine (ANU), seven (USyD), 14 (UNE), 17 (PKU), 31 (UIBE) and four (NU) images respectively were found on the theme pages for international students on the six universities' websites. Fig. 4 provides a breakdown of the images' characteristics, analysed from a multimodal social semiotic perspective.

According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006, p. 140; 251), the way images are produced determines how viewers are positioned and how they can interact with them, that is, whether they see an image close up or from a distance, frontally (involved) or from an oblique angle (detached), from above (from a position of power) or from below (with the image having power over the viewer), or at eye level (with no power difference involved). At the same time, images of human beings are said to have 'psychological salience' for viewers (Kress and Leeuwen, 2006, p. 63). Fig. 4 shows that close or medium shots were used predominantly by most of the universities. The preference for close and medium shots thus indicates the universities' efforts to close the social distance between the university and the international
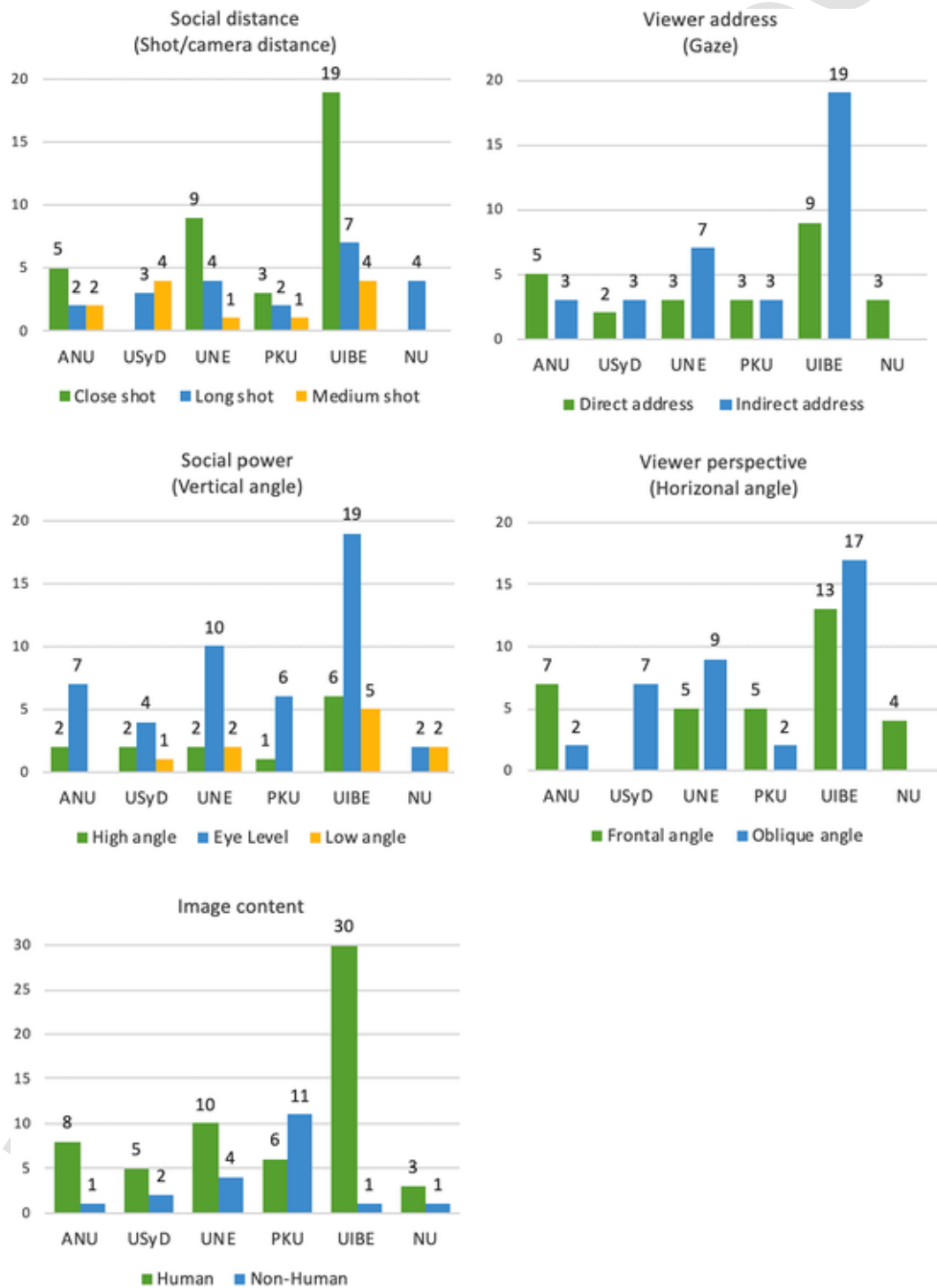

Fig. 4. Characteristics of visuals on the theme page for international students.

student viewers. Only NU used long shots for all four images which comprised three group photos (see Fig. 5(c)) and a photo of the campus landscape, thus placing viewers at a distance. Except for ANU and NU, who showed a preference for direct address in their images, with the portrayed participants in the images gazing directly at the viewer, the other universities used indirect address more often, placing viewers in the role of observers. All the six universities predominantly used eye-level images, thus creating an equal viewing relationship for their international student viewers. All the universities with the exception of PKU appear to prefer images of humans far more than non-human images, suggesting an intention to involve their international student viewers at a psychological level. Overall, the analysis suggests that all six universities appear intent on involving international student viewers through their images (through close shots, direct address and human images), and by establishing an equal viewing relationship (through eye-level images).

Although the Fisher's Exact Test through the SPSS did not indicate statistically significant differences between the Australian and Chinese universities in the use of the images ($p = 0.765$, $= 1$, $= 0.500$, $= 0.337$, $= 1$ respectively for social power, viewer address, social distance, viewer perspective, image content), what was presented in the verbals and the visuals demonstrates notable intercultural differences. It was illustrated in Section 4.2.1 that international students were often refused an agentive role on the Chinese university theme pages. Instead, on these webpages, government officials and important people were generally portrayed in more central positions in the photographs accompanying the news reports. They were also assigned agentive roles in the verbal clauses of the news reports, that is, as the subjects/actors in the processes verbalised in the clauses, as illustrated in the example:

"???(…??? ??, ?1500????????????????????

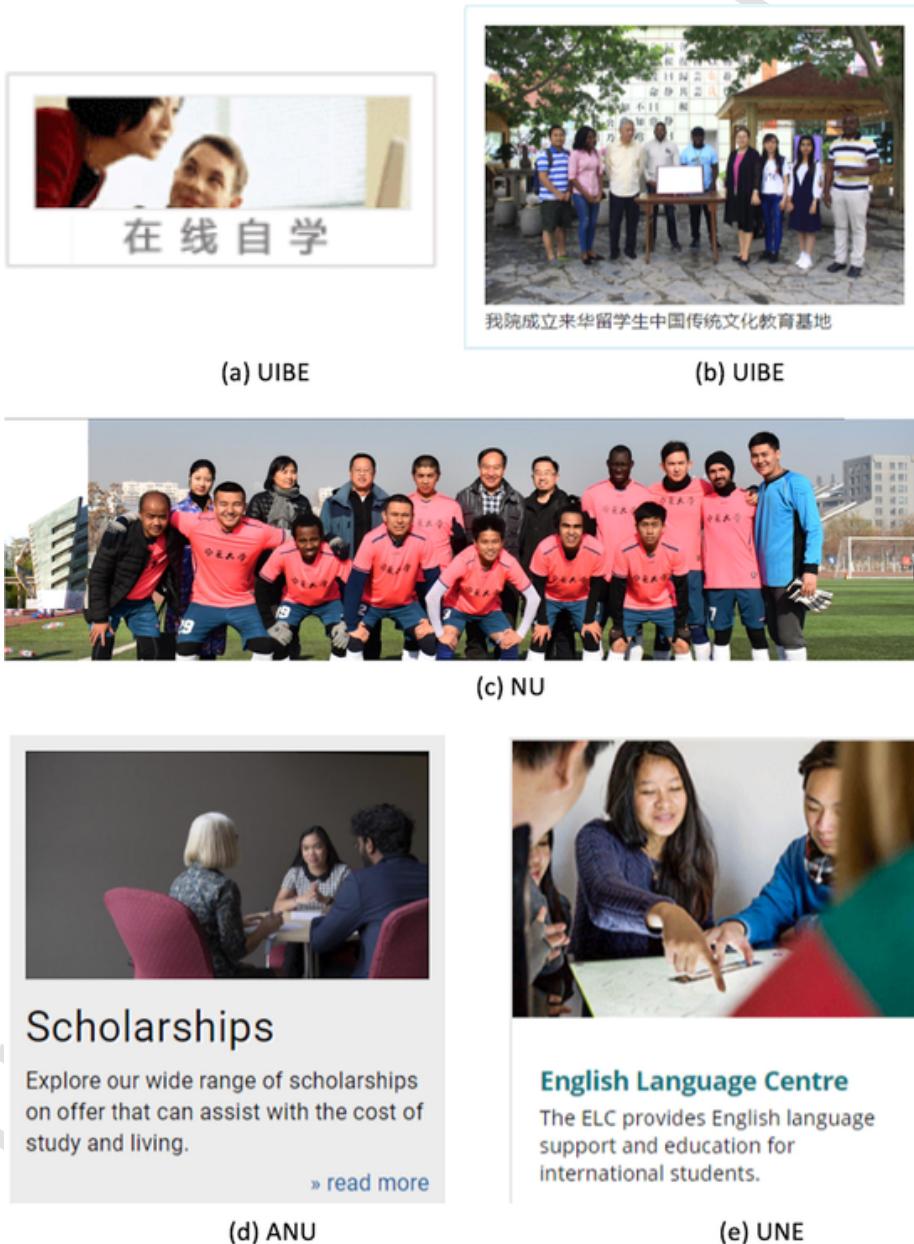(a) UIBE

(b) UIBE

(c) NU

(d) ANU

(e) UNE

Fig. 5. Student-teacher relation constructed on university webpages.

??)" [Headquarters of the Confucian Institute Deputy Director and Hanban Deputy Director Zhao Guocheng, Chinese Service Center for Scholarly Exchange of the Ministry of Education Director Cheng Jiacai, China Scholarship Council Deputy Secretary-General Zhang (… etc., came on-site, and watched the performance together with more than 1, 500 Peking University students and staff, international alumni, and guests invited from the university and beyond)]. [PKU]

This practice is also evident in the visuals on the Chinese university webpages. For example, in Fig. 5(a) which shows an online self-study scene on the UIBE theme page, the teacher is shown stooping over the computer (assuming a position of power) with the student sitting at the computer table looking up at the teacher, embodying the hierarchical teacher-student relationship. In the other images (e.g., in Fig. 5(b) and (c)), the teachers tended to stand in the centre of the photos of group activities with the students standing around them or crouching in front of them, again highlighting the status differential in the teacher-student dyads. This resonates with Song et al.'s (2019) observation that Chinese society is characterised by high levels of power distance, where employees (or in this case, university students) may "treat leaders with considerable worship and respect because the former believes that the latter possesses superiority and status" (p. 1055). Despite the opening up of its market economy and apparent policy shifts relating to the marketisation and decentralisation of higher education in China (Feng, 2019, p. 122), the hierarchical relationship persists between international student viewers and the university on the Chinese webpages.

In contrast, in the study scenes depicted on the Australian university webpages, students were by themselves, exploring and experiencing difficulties and solutions (see Fig. 6), and in the rare images of students with their teachers, they were sitting around a round table (see Fig. 5(d) and (e)). This sitting arrangement creates a space for reciprocal interaction, which helps minimise the power differential between the teacher and the student (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006). In effect, international students are shown two different experiences of study abroad on Australian and Chinese university websites. While the Chinese university images suggest the idea of education by teacher instruction and learning in a collective, the Australian universities would point to education through teacher-guided and supported individual pursuit.

4.2.3. Framing verbals and visuals to position international students as experiencer or recipient

The affordances of the webpage including the interplay between visuals and verbals allow the power relations and cultural messages to play out (Mautner, 2005; Teo, 2007). In the case of university webpages, the easy juxtaposition of text blocks on the webpage enables universities to position their text blocks in a way that encourages certain reading paths to create ideational and interpersonal meanings. For example, the Chinese university webpages reported news and made announcements in the sections designated for them in the content zone. Given the prime position of the content zone on the theme page, the news and the announcements were granted prominence and presented to international students as important information. The reporting of events and happenings that may be relevant to international students but may not be personally relatable for them on the Chinese university webpages echoes the practice of reporting daily news in the national news media. In effect, international students at the Chinese universities were constructed as recipients of broadcast news. In contrast, the Australian university webpages framed such happenings as experiences students can relate to. On the USyD webpage, for example, students were shown taking selfies together, interacting in the dorm, and communicating on the bench on campus (see Fig. 6). These photos were taken at eye level, medium shot and oblique angles which suggest no obtrusiveness on the side of the university. These visuals are also accompanied by verbals in the form of news. The verbal news texts are headlined and unfold in a problem–solution discourse pattern: Challenges of homesickness ˆ student experiences including fun visits to scenic spots with friends; learning at university ˆ student experiences of self-discovery and transformation; friendship making at university ˆ student experiences of striking a conversation and making friends. Rather than urging or speaking down to international student viewers, the university assumed the role of a mentor for academic, social and personal learning at university by drawing on the experiences of international students' peers and framing them as students learning to autonomously handle common problems such as homesickness, interpersonal skills and collaborative learning. In other words, the visuals and the experiences they represent are co-deployed with the verbal texts in strategically iconic or indexical relations (Peirce, 1931–1958) in the content

Fig. 6. Student experiences in the form of news (USyD).

zone to exemplify the student experience. The contrasts between the Australian and Chinese universities may well reflect the Australian universities' proclivity of foregrounding a positive student experience as a marketing or branding strategy (Lewin-Jones, 2019; O'Halloran et al., 2015).

It is also interesting to note the absence of captions for the alternating images on the Chinese university webpages. In contrast, on the Australian university webpages, all visuals were accompanied by verbals. Captions serve to delimit possible interpretations (Fiske, 1990). In the images with captions, information is specified. This suits the low-context culture where information needs to be made explicit instead of relying unduly on the context, whereas in the high-context culture, information is tacit (Zhang and O'Halloran, 2012). From a critical discourse perspective (e.g., Fairclough, 1989; Wodak and Meyer, 2015), controlling access to knowledge and information may serve to implicitly legitimise the ideologies of powerful groups, and obscure or reinforce unequal power relations that may exist in a society (e.g., Rossolatos, 2018; Sung et al., 2019). As the production and dissemination of knowledge and information obviously resides in the powerful, and understandably, in the university and their staff rather than international students, the withholding of information in the alternating images on the Chinese university webpages may be further evidence for the egalitarian versus hierarchical relations between international students and the university discussed in Section 4.2.2.

4.2.4. Cohesive representations of international students on the university theme pages

The verbals and visuals in the content zones that have been analysed in Sections 4.2.1, 4.2.2 and 4.2.3 construct distinct representations of international students at Australian and Chinese universities. Following low-context cultural practices, evidence-based persuasion in academia and generally egalitarian interpersonal relationships, the Australian universities made explicit their information for choosing a study destination through the verbals, and assigned international students autonomous and equal positionings both in the verbals and the visuals. The Chinese universities, on the other hand, retained high-context cultural norms by keeping some information implicit, resorting to non-explicit persuasion, and reproducing the hierarchical university/teacher-student relationship through creating guide/information provider-follower/information recipient positionings for international students. These representations of international students reflect the corresponding conceptions of international student education in China and Australia: Cultivating graduates who know China and help connect China to the outside world (China Scholarship Council, 2012) versus providing an educational experience or service to students/clients without foregrounding community building (Australian Government, 2016). The discursive practices employed by the Chinese and Australian universities in this study thus empower students in different ways, reflecting the different cultural norms and practices: That is, at the Chinese universities students are empowered to become members of the community with its various hierarchical practices, whereas at the Australian universities students are empowered to discover themselves (e.g., Lewin-Jones, 2019; Suspitsyna and Shalk, 2019). Creating an awareness of what these differences are is critical for students, as it will prepare them for the different experiences they can expect to be exposed to as international students at these universities.

These representations also show the Australian and Chinese universities' internally cohesive approaches to international student education in the climate of neoliberal thinking in higher education. Similar to other Asian and Australian universities which were shown to embrace neoliberal concepts such as university education as transformation and life style for students (see O'Halloran et al., 2015; Zhang and O'Halloran, 2013) to market themselves to international students, the three Australian universities in this study showcased their approach of addressing international students by representing them as agentive explorers and experiencers. Although the Chinese universities emulated their Australian counterparts by adopting practices that are suggestive of neoliberal thinking, for example, the extensive use of images to engage international students (O'Halloran et al., 2015), they were shown to follow their characteristic approach to education (Yang, 2016; Hong, 2018; Ma and Zhao, 2018) by portraying university life in terms of the traditional academic, art and athletic undertakings.

4.3. Accommodating international students on the Australian and Chinese university webpages

4.3.1. Convergence through language choices

All three Chinese universities provided an English version of the webpage for international students. They also opted for English when a translation from Chinese might be difficult to seek or would appear ambiguous. For example, on PKU's theme page for international students, the navigation tab *ru xue jiao yu* [literally, entrance instruction], which involves a complicated process at Chinese universities, was rendered as *Orientation*. There seem to be nuanced ways of accommodating international students on the three Australian university webpages. The Australian universities, unsurprisingly, used the English language on their webpages, but they also attended to other languages, either through providing websites in the native language of their international students, as was true of ANU, or offering English language services to international students at its English Language Centre as at UNE, or in a more sophisticated way, showing the university's expertise in the students' regions as on the USyD theme page. It can be noted that these three different approaches represent differing understandings of international student needs during their sojourn overseas and varied levels of expertise in addressing these students. While UNE and ANU attended to international students' needs to function in English-medium academic and community life, USyD appeared to have captured international students' deeper needs to be understood with reference to where they are from and what they are and thus conveyed a sense of transnational education (Rizvi, 2012).

4.3.2. Filtering and simplifying information for international students

While the multiple navigation zones on the webpages of the six universities evidence freedom of navigation (Djonov and Knox, 2014) for international students, there is a sense of the Chinese universities exercising a filtering process for international students through the use of font, size, colour and position on the theme page. For PKU, the selected navigation tabs were immediately below the alternating images on the first screen, for UIBE, to the right of the alternating images, and on the NU theme page, to the very left of the content zone. This small step may show the university's sense of helping international students to sift through the web of information to reach the most relevant information for them. That is, the university cares and acts as the carer to the extent that a teacher-student guidance relationship was coming through the Chinese university theme pages.

Information was also simplified for international students on the Chinese university webpages. For example, PKU's international student theme page seldom featured images, but it provided a much more simplified set of headings than the set of headings on the university's homepage and highlighted only the most directly relevant ones on the international student theme page, which were also signposted/simplified by largely iconic and indexical signs such as the sign ¥ (Chinese currency RMB yuan) for scholarship (see Fig. 7). Arguably, the Chinese university was converging to its international students due to their Chinese language proficiency to ease them into the information perceived to be essential to them.

Fig. 7. Visuals accompanying verbal navigation tabs on PKU's international student theme page.

4.3.3. Constraints for convergence in the intercultural space of university theme page

Both the Australian and Chinese universities used the default standard language – English – even though they appeared to be making the apparently similar choices with different motives. For the Australian universities, the inclusion of their international student viewers' native language is presumably more interpersonal than ideational as the information is already conveyed in the English version and is thus a strategy of convergence to accommodate international students. For the Chinese universities, the inclusion of an English translation on the webpages indicates the universities' inclination to internationalisation. The choice of English may also be a pragmatic consideration. It is worth noting that the privilege given to the English language on the Chinese university webpages may be overlooking diversity among international students – some of them may not know English well enough. Accommodation through language choices in intercultural communication is thus complicated and consequential (e.g., Vandermeeren, 1999) and should be cautiously interpreted in a critical manner by drawing on the cultural politics of languages (Pennycook, 2014) and ethical concerns in globalisation discourse (Blommaert, 2010).

The convergence in terms of catering to international students' needs should not stop with language-related concerns given the other issues that concern international students such as meaningful interactions with local students and the community, wellbeing and mental health (e.g., Skromanis et al., 2018). The Australian universities seem to lead in this regard by beginning to consider international students' emotional and social needs, which are somehow overlooked in the Chinese universities' efforts to accommodation international students.

5. Conclusions

Despite its small scale in terms of sample size and scope of analysis, this multimodal, social semiotic study of Australian and Chinese universities addressing international students indicates that Australian and Chinese universities produce cohesively distinct representations of international students through the visuals, verbals and the interplay between the semiotic resources. The differing representations may be understood by referring to the cultural and intercultural factors at work. We have shown how the contextual factors, in particular the conception of international student education in the two cultures, may have impacted on the communication in the assumed intercultural space and created complexity in the digital artefacts. This study indicates the complication neoliberal thinking in higher education brings to the intercultural communication on university webpages for international students, in particular for the Chinese universities. Their discursive practices display some impacts of neoliberal forces, for example, the extensive use of images on the theme pages for international students, and the language choices and visual sources to compensate for international students' language proficiency in Chinese. Meanwhile, the Chinese universities maintain a hierarchical teacher-student relationship cohesively across their theme pages. The omnipotence of neoliberalism has been challenged on multiple fronts, in education in particular (e.g., Marginson, 2013; Tight, 2019). The Chinese universities' theme pages for international students have provided new evidence for putting in check the neoliberal conception of international students as consumers.

It will be interesting and meaningful to follow up this study by compiling a larger corpus of Chinese and Australian university theme pages

for international students to validate the findings reported in this article. The role of interdiscursivity (Bhatia, 2017) as the appropriation of discursive (genres) and social practices in managing the multiple institutional interests (e.g., university branding, diversity management, maintaining traditional values of university) we have observed on the webpages is worth investigating. As has been demonstrated in the literature (e.g., Lewin-Jones, 2019; O'Halloran et al., 2015) and also noted in this study (e.g., PKU's theme page for international students and its homepage), a comparative study of the webpages for domestic students or general audience with the university theme pages for international students will be useful to gauge a particular education provider's conceptualisation of international student education. There is also much value in tracking changes on university webpages for international students over time to appreciate the evolution of understandings of international student education and possible trends.

Uncited references

Rossolatos, 2018; Wodak and Meyer, 2015.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix A. Supplementary material

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dcm.2020.100403.

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