

Selling out the Public University? Administrative Sensemaking Strategies for Internationalization via Private Pathway Colleges in Canadian Higher Education

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Abstract

The emergence of agreements between private pathway colleges and public English-medium institutions represents a new development in internationalization that further challenges the public higher education landscape. While these institutional arrangements are controversial and often criticized, university senior administrators have been successfully able to advocate for and authorize them. This paper takes a closer look into the reasoning that administrators use in order to legitimize formal agreements with private pathway colleges in Canada. Drawing from the sensemaking literature within organizational theory, the following strategies are traced and analyzed: 1) normalization, 2) authorization, 3) rationalization, 4) moralization, and 5) narrativization. Through content analysis of 50 institutional documents, supported by nine semi-structured interviews with senior administrators representing two public universities and one private provider in Canada (Navitas), the paper demonstrates how neoliberal ideologies in internationalization are actively enacted in public spaces by administrators representing the public higher education sector.

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Introduction

The internationalization of higher education is characterized by complexity, conflicting interests, and clashing values. Many scholars have described internationalization in relation to various academic, social, and cultural benefits, including more internationally oriented staff/students and improved academic quality (see Altbach & Knight, 2007). More recently, the purposeful connection of internationalization with institutional social responsibility for global common good has become a strategic goal (Jones et al., 2021). Some view internationalization as a mechanism for decolonial approaches to education (Thondhlana et al., 2021). However, a mounting critical literature has associated internationalization with economic pursuits that result in inequities, power hierarchies, and new forms of colonialism (Beck, 2013; Marginson, 2006; Stein et al., 2016). Public universities are seen as the drivers of these problematic activities; thus, they often become a target of scholarly criticism for their aggressive recruitment strategies to attract the best and the brightest at all costs (Brunner, 2017; Guo & Guo, 2017; Wildavsky, 2012). A relatively recent phenomenon associated with the recruitment of international students across the globe is formal collaboration between public universities and private for-profit companies that offer direct pathways for international students into post-secondary education at their partnering public university (Agosti & Bernat, 2018; Brett & Pitman, 2018; King & Owens, 2018; Miller et al., 2015). The emergence of the private pathway colleges represents a new trend, primarily in English-language institutions in countries such as Australia, Canada, and the United States, that challenges the public higher education landscape. As private pathway colleges exist in the interface between the public domain of education and the private sphere, they push the boundaries towards commodification of public knowledge by using individual financial ability, institutional prestige, and English language proficiency as top markers for quality in the transnational labour market (McCartney & Metcalfe, 2018). Furthermore, pathway colleges form a distinct institutional type that is neither a degree-granting nor a non-degree-granting postsecondary institution with limited governance through policy and structure (McCartney & Metcalfe, 2018).

We know relatively little about this recent trend in international education. The major corporate providers of university pathway programs worldwide are Bridge Pathways, Cambridge Education Group, Culture Works, INTO University Partnerships, Kaplan International Colleges, Navitas, Shorelight Education, and Study Group International (Agosti & Bernat, 2018; Larsen, 2020). These private providers offer almost half of the pathway programs in existence. In collaboration with public universities, private pathway colleges have set up “bridging programs” that

help international students to improve their academic and English language skills required for university admissions, whilst providing them with supported access to post-secondary education in a host country (Miller et al., 2015). These programs are often perceived as problematic. On one hand, these programs are beneficial to post-secondary institutions and students, as they help with the academic preparedness of international students by improving their English language skills and supporting cultural adaptation to the host country (McKay et al., 2018). However, critical scholarship has suggested that these programs overlook equity aspects by focusing on a continuous flow of financial resources to the host university through international tuition fees and operating essentially as institutional grooming projects. Wang (2016) noted how international students felt that they had been purposefully placed at a low level within their pathway program to generate further income for the college. McCartney and Metcalfe (2018) described the vulnerability of international students (limited connections with local students, no formal diploma, reduced supports available), as well as aspects of the pathway programs that influence their associated public higher education systems—generated income may lead to reduced operating grants from the governments.

While controversial and potentially problematic, such programs are increasingly popular across the globe, despite the restrictions and barriers created by the global pandemic (Brett & Pitman, 2018; Larsen, 2020; Syme et al., 2020). Guhr and Furtado (2015, p. 6) proposed that the pathways to post-secondary have become a “hot topic.” Brett and Pitman (2018, p. 39) argued that pathway programs require further examination of their locations, program offerings, and the factors that result in their establishment, highlighting the need for further research. Similarly, McCartney and Metcalfe (2018, p. 6) suggested that more research is necessary to understand the specific characteristics, developmental contexts, and trajectories of these colleges. Understanding the dynamics between the pathways colleges and post-secondary institutions would help to raise institutional awareness and create policies and frameworks that can guide higher education institutions towards engaging in more equitable practices in international education.

The purpose of this paper is to examine and analyze the administrative reasoning behind university decisions to enter into formal agreements with pathway colleges. As will be demonstrated in the article, these decisions are often associated with controversies and public criticism. It is assumed that university administrators are well aware of the criticisms surrounding international student recruitment and the potential optics of working with a private pathway college. Nevertheless, university senior administrators have been able to advocate for and authorize these institutional arrangements, convincing others of their benefits to the greater good and to the institution. The research question that guides this paper is the following: *What sensemaking strategies do administrators use in order to legitimize institutional agreements with private pathway colleges?* Drawing from the case of Canada, this paper traces and analyzes the narratives used by administrators at two Canadian public universities—Simon Fraser University in the province of British Columbia and the University of

Manitoba in the province of Manitoba. The paper examines how these agreements have been rationalized and framed by the administrators working in English-speaking institutions. While there is an increasing literature surrounding internationalization and private pathway colleges (Agosti & Bernat, 2018; Brett & Pitman, 2018; King & Owens, 2018), this area of administrative decision-making has been largely unexplored, which provides opportunities to share empirical evidence and clarify reasonings related to the role of private pathway colleges in internationalization. While the agreements with private pathway colleges have emerged primarily in the context of English-medium institutions (in the United States, Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom), this paper is relevant to broader audiences because it examines how controversial and conflicting decisions associated with internationalization get justified and legitimized.

Sensemaking

This paper draws on the literature of sensemaking, grounded in organizational theory. The sensemaking literature examines how stakeholders develop shared cognition, perceptions, and interpretations of change initiatives and create plausible narratives that help to rationalize decisions (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2020; Thurlow & Mills, 2015). In educational contexts, sensemaking has been used to examine narratives created around organizational change (e.g., Kezar, 2013; Thurlow & Mills, 2015), leadership behaviors (e.g., Degn, 2015), and programmatic reforms (e.g., Soini et al., 2018; Zuckerman, 2019). Scholars have argued that sensemaking is a social process that leaders apply when controversial changes occur within organizations (Humphreys et al., 2012; Weick et al., 2005). Sensemaking is defined as the process through which people work to understand issues or events that are novel, ambiguous, or confusing, or in some other way may violate expectations (Cornelissen, 2012; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Weick, 1995). Sensemaking begins when an individual realizes something controversial is happening and begins to unpack the situation well enough to make a decision to control, monitor, or ignore the situation. Internationalization through private pathway colleges is an example of such controversy linked to ambiguity and conflicting values. The context of neoliberal ideology manifested in the privatization of public education further adds controversy to such decisions whereby administrators face ethical dilemmas of being complicit in the processes of governments decreasing investments to public education (Browning & Elnagar, 2022), challenges to the autonomy of universities (Viczo, 2013), and increased competition for students in an open market for economic gain (Saunders & Blanco Ramirez, 2017).

Sensemaking goes beyond a simple interpretation of a situation to involve active framing and narrative construction by the administrators to help support organizational decisions (Mills et al., 2010). The focus on a plausible narrative is particularly important here, as it helps to examine how sensemaking and legitimacy-building processes have materialized in the context of higher education internationalization. Plausibility is understood as an attempt to normalize a situation through a process of adding value

and credibility to one's actions. At the administrative level, efforts are made to construct a plausible sense of what is happening, and this sense of plausibility normalizes a possible breach, restores expectations, legitimizes decisions, and enables projects to continue (Navis & Glynn, 2011, p. 488). Thurlow and Mills (2015, p. 249) introduced five types of legitimation strategies: 1) normalization, 2) authorization, 3) rationalization, 4) moralization, and 5) narrativization. *Normalization* is described as a form of authorization whereby events or actions make sense because they are actively constructed as normal or natural (Vaara & Tienar, 2008). An example of this is when generalizations are used to connect internationalization with institutional quality or prestige (e.g., all world-class universities engage in internationalization). *Authorization* refers to legitimation processes that invoke the authority of laws, customs, or powerful individuals. In international education this may appear through references to internationalization strategies, recruitment targets, or speeches made by university senior administration. *Rationalization* references actions based upon specific knowledge claims that are accepted as relevant or 'true' in a given context (e.g., international students enhance campus diversity). *Moralization* strategies are constructed by referencing specific value systems. This is often seen in regards to diversity, equity, and inclusion (e.g., internationalization is beneficial to all students; international students should not be treated differently just because they pay more). Finally, *narrativization* refers to processes that situate an action within a relevant or accepted storytelling framework (Thurlow & Mills, 2015, p. 249). Using these processes, actors contribute to sensemaking by creating stories that legitimate and contribute to a plausible sense of what is happening.

Sensemaking is not a linear process; it does not happen in particular phases or a certain sequence. The literature points to an array of contextual factors that can potentially influence sensemaking efforts such as institutional context (private/public), language, individual identity, cognitive frameworks (the values and norms of an individual), emotion, politics, and technology (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015). A critical element of sensemaking analysis is that organizational sensemaking needs to be explored in relation to the contextual factors of structure and power in which it occurs (Mills et al., 2010).

Controversies Related to Private Pathway Colleges in Canada

The main provider of pathway programs in Canada is Navitas, established in 1994 with headquarters in Australia (Navitas, n.d.). Navitas has operated in Canada since 2006, signing formal institutional arrangements with Simon Fraser University (SFU) in the province of British Columbia (2006), the University of Manitoba in the province of Manitoba (2008), and Toronto Metropolitan University (formerly Ryerson University) in the province of Ontario (2020). In each of these locations, the arrangement has resulted in a new private institutional entity—Fraser International College (FIC), International College of Manitoba (ICM), and Ryerson University International College. In 2012, Navitas generated more than \$40 million in revenue from its Canadian operations (Larsen, 2021). The vast majority of

pathway colleges in Canada (88%) promise students direct entry into the partner university once they have completed the pathway program (McCartney & Metcalfe, 2018). The typical Navitas model stipulates that the host institution receives a percentage of student tuition from each International College student, regardless of whether the student successfully matriculates into the university or not (Maschmann, 2018). While studying at those colleges, students can use the facilities, libraries, and other student services of the public host institution.

Navitas enterprise in Canada is surrounded by vagueness and continuous controversy around its functions and operations (Larsen, 2020). Initiating these institutional agreements has been met with faculty resistance during university senate meetings and opposition from deans and teachers' unions. The main concern lies in the fact that publicly funded universities are generating income from private sources and are essentially prioritizing the needs of the private sector. A university administrator noted: *"A lot of people felt that we were kind of selling out the idea of a publicly funded university"* (interview, 5 August 2020). Teachers' unions have expressed concerns about the non-existent labour protection and working conditions for Navitas' non-unionized staff (Maqsood, 2021). This strong resistance from faculty members resulted in shelving the most recent negotiations in 2021 at Western University in Ontario (Larsen, 2020). When contracts with Simon Fraser University and University of Manitoba were eventually signed, similar issues were raised. At Simon Fraser University, senators raised questions about prioritizing institutional financial success over student experience and their lack of access to the FIC decision-making process, clearly indicating their no-vote to the motion (SFU, 2006). Maschmann (2018) further described tensions at Simon Fraser University, pointing to the issue of transferring the delivery of English language instruction, once located in SFU's Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, to Navitas. Nevertheless, Navitas' agreement with Simon Fraser was renewed, extending their existing 14-year formal partnership to 2030 (Navitas, 2020). In 2008, faculty members of the University of Manitoba raised issues around institutional recruitment practices and refund policies (Larsen, 2012). Senate meeting minutes reflected that the contract itself was not revealed to Senate members: *"...legal counsel has advised that referral of the contract to neither Senate nor to the Board of Governors was necessary, and that it is Administration's responsibility to handle contracts"* (University of Manitoba, 2008b, p. 4). Furthermore, a study participant noted: *"It [the formal partnership] started in 2007 and it got off to a very rocky start because the agreement ended up being reported in the papers"* (interview, 27 August, 2020). Nevertheless, Navitas' institutional agreement with the University of Manitoba was signed in 2008 and renewed in 2017 for another 10 years (Navitas, 2017). What adds to the controversy is the limited availability of and access to student enrollment numbers or financial data associated with these institutional arrangements (Maschmann, 2018). Some information is available through publicly available senate meeting minutes on universities' websites but Navitas' website does not publicly provide specific data regarding student application or enrollment numbers.

This context provides a foundation for taking a closer look at the perspectives of senior administrators and examining their processes of sensemaking while legitimizing controversial agreements with private pathway colleges (Navitas) in Canada.

Methodology

A qualitative case study design was used to examine the phenomenon of administrative sensemaking in international education. Document analysis and semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. Publicly available documents such as minutes from senate meetings and board of governors' meetings, universities' annual evaluation reports on pathway colleges, and external review documents, as well as Navitas policies (e.g., fee policies, admissions policies, academic policies, and annual reports) were collected and analyzed. The dates of the documents ranged between 2006–2020. A total of 50 documents were determined relevant and included in the analysis (17 from Simon Fraser/FIC; 21 from University of Manitoba/ICM; and 12 from Navitas). The purpose of document analysis was to collect information and examine the narratives used during the debates occurring in university settings. This step allowed understanding of stakeholder positions, the framings used, and the authority exercised in decision-making processes. Zoom interviews with participants were carried out in the summer and fall of 2020. Nine administrators (three administrators from Navitas, three senior administrators from Simon Fraser University, and three senior administrators from the University of Manitoba) were interviewed. Interviewees were purposefully selected based on their association with the Navitas pathway colleges as well as the host institutions. The purpose of the interviews was to collect data on individual experiences with and perceptions of these formal partnerships. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Textual analysis of documents and interview transcripts was performed through deductive categorization (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006; Burnard, 1991; Creswell, 1998), following the categorization matrix derived from Thurlow and Mills' (2015) five types of legitimation strategies: 1) normalization, 2) authorization, 3) rationalization, 4) moralization, and 5) narrativization. Within this matrix, open coding of the research results was carried out, matching data to the initial thematic categories. Then, the second step involved axial coding where the five core categories were refined and merged into sub-groups, forming a coding paradigm. The possibility of new emerging categories was left open. Finally, selective coding was used to organize the categories, interpret data, and present the research findings (Creswell, 2014). Through textual analysis and data synthesis, the research question was answered.

Findings

Normalization

This strategy emerged when administrators spoke about internationalization as a standard activity for the university. The Navitas agreements were framed as an inevitable

part of the institutional internationalization process. This sensemaking strategy was prevalent in one administrator in particular, who had moved between several leadership positions and was reflecting back on events. The administrator viewed the rapidly increasing international student numbers as a normal and expected development. He first reflected on the institutional resistance towards internationalization around the late 2000s but noted that the situation had gradually changed. This participant commented: *"I think people have gotten used to the idea and have realized that one way or another, we were going to have more international students here"* (interview, 5 August, 2020). The administrator also commented that: *"the original impetus was to simply get more international students on campus, just to be a more international university"* (interview, 5 August, 2020). From these quotes, it is evident that internationalization is associated with the idea of gradual and anticipated development in the university and that the Navitas agreement served as one component of this process.

The normalization strategy was associated with the broader benefit to institutional visibility and reputation. The notion of international rankings was brought up in the conversation as an aspect for consideration. Increasing one's position in the global rankings was associated with being taken seriously among other world-class research-intensive universities, and having more international students was posited as beneficial to global rankings. The following quote illustrates that idea: *"If we want to be internationally recognized, we need to have international partnerships!.../If we want to be ranked in the top 30 in the world, we'd better have partnerships with Sydney and London and Hong Kong and, you know, Shanghai, because people won't take us seriously"* (interview, 5 August, 2020). The Navitas formal partnership would help to make such connections through international students from these cities and consequently would help to increase the university's international reputation, similarly to other big universities globally. This diversification was viewed as a normal and expected evolution in institutional efforts to expand the university's reach to students from more geographic locations, which would further attest to the global position of the university.

By using the strategy of normalization, administrators felt comfortable in their private pathway college activities, seeing them as part of their job and a responsibility to support. The Navitas partnership arrangement was viewed as a new exciting opportunity that contributed to internationalization processes. Normalization is one of the strategies that allows for a guilt-free engagement with private partners, without critically questioning the role of privatization in public higher education spaces.

Authorization

Authorization is a sensemaking strategy that is driven by the authority of legal regulations, institutional policies, and/or the power of one's professional expertise. Entering into the Navitas agreement was perceived to be appropriate and legitimate as long as it stayed within all legal frameworks and did not violate institutional

policy. It was apparent from the interviews that the university administrators made significant efforts to stay within legal regulations with Navitas. An administrator commented: “*It [the partnership agreement] was carefully reviewed by the university’s legal counsel*” (interview, 27 August, 2020). A Navitas administrator also confirmed: “*They [senior administrators] hired one of the big firms to kind of go deep on all of the financials and, you know, legal claims or anything like that and verify that everything we said was true*” (interview, 26 August, 2020). Relying on the authority of law was one of the most significant themes among sensemaking strategies, as it provided a strong reassurance about the formal legitimacy of the agreements. This strategy provided added confidence against issues raised by the university community and the public.

The findings also suggest that policy documents on internationalization (international education strategies, institutional strategic plans, the federal internationalization strategy) serve as an added mechanism for legitimizing formal private–public partnerships. In both cases examined in this study, highly ambitious institutional education goals that contained student recruitment numbers created a binding mandate for administrators. For example, a memorandum created by the provost’s office at Simon Fraser University stated the following:

“The recruitment objectives also include the desire to diversify the country of origin for international students going to SFU. This objective is derived from the university’s wider internationalization goal designed to increase diversity and provide the basis for greater inter-cultural exchange (International Student Recruitment document dated January 13, 2006).” (SFU, 2010, p. 23)

Similarly, the University of Manitoba made reference to its institutional strategic plan to support the formal partnership with Navitas (see University of Manitoba, 2017, pp. 75–76). These references to policy documents served as a strong impetus for initiating and extending the Navitas contracts.

Authorization was also exercised by tapping into the formal and informal power that comes with a senior administrator’s position. According to senate documents, motions to enter into agreements with Navitas came from provosts, vice presidents, or associate vice presidents, as opposed to deans, regular senate members, or senate committees. Motions were seconded by full professors. These people carry significant power, prestige, and security (tenured positions) within the university, which provides an added layer of authorization when advocating for potentially controversial contracts. In one case, the senior administrator was also known to be an expert in international education, which added credibility. A participant reflected:

“In the mid-2000s, we had an Associate Vice-President Students who was very, very experienced in international education. The Vice-President Academic was also interested in building international numbers, so I think they saw this as a way of increasing the international enrollment at SFU without having to invest a lot of SFU money in hiring

recruiters, hiring agents, developing a presence in Asia, in particular.” (interview, 5 August, 2020)

When the case for a formal Navitas partnership was made at the SFU Senate, additional reassurances were made in regard to institutional accountability. It was suggested that various measures such as reporting on the academic progress of students, monitoring recruitment plans, checking departmental workloads, and examining the working conditions of Navitas instructors would take place (SFU, March 2006). Performance indicators were also mentioned as a sensemaking strategy when the contract was up for a renewal. Despite these accountability mechanisms, reluctance to renew the contract was still present among the senate members. A senior administrator commented: *“The same people who didn’t like it [the contract] the first time probably didn’t like it the second time, but there was a lot of data to back it up, and it was approved”* (interview, 27 August).

In the institutional documents, the narrative around maintaining full control over Navitas programs was evident. Assertive language was used to convey a strong sense of institutional authority and control. For example, SFU reported that *“to ensure that teaching at FIC is up to standard and that courses are transferable to SFU degrees, the University retains oversight of the curriculum and pedagogy”* (SFU, 2015, pp. 85–86). The University of Manitoba Senate minutes demonstrated how the provost reinforced the idea of the university distancing itself from Navitas: *“The agreement does not offer an affiliation, or an association and it falls within existing guidelines. No special titles or privileges will be granted to Navitas”* (University of Manitoba, 2008a, p. 4).

Authorization as a sensemaking strategy illuminates how senior administrators have used the authority of legal frameworks and their personal power in order to move forward with the private pathway college agreements. Furthermore, institutional policy documents have provided a strong impetus for universities to engage in such agreements in order to fulfill the ambitious goals set for student recruitment numbers.

Rationalization

Rationalization was another strategy that was prevalent across all interviewed participants. This strategy was apparent when administrators presented statements that were suggested to be “true” and “valid.” Various claims were typically associated with financial benefits, presenting the Navitas formal partnership as an important initiative for economic reasons.

Most interviewees brought up the fact that the provincial governments had significantly decreased their annual funding to universities. In British Columbia in particular, educational institutions are legally encouraged by the government to generate additional revenue from private sources to supplement operational grants from the government (Fallon & Poole, 2014). In Manitoba, educational institutions are following a similar path. A University of Manitoba policy report stated that the main rationale

for entering into an agreement with Navitas was financial, listing three types of fees that the university was collecting: royalty fees, fees for student services (library access, recreation facilities, technology fee), and tuition fees (University of Manitoba, 2017, pp. 74–75). From 2008–2016 the revenues generated from the ICM program resulted in over \$47.1 million for the university (University of Manitoba, 2017, p. 75). According to a senior administrator from the University of Manitoba, “*government grants have been reduced*” (interview, 7 August, 2020). According to another administrator, recruitment of international students has become an institutional necessity:

“Recruiting international students has become something that pretty much every public institution, not just in Canada, but globally, is becoming more reliant on. And that’s related to how public institutions are being funded by government.” (interview, 26 October, 2020)

The idea of saving money for the university was another theme that was used as a rationalization strategy to justify the Navitas agreements. This theme emerged in both interviews and in policy documents. The Navitas agreements were perceived to be helpful, as they would allow the universities to tap into Navitas’ significant global recruitment network, as opposed to investing time and money to develop one on their own. The following statement comes from a memorandum of Simon Fraser University explaining the expansion of the program: “...*the SFU-FIC relationship is sufficiently attractive financially to SFU that expanding the program will be seen as a low cost-high revenue method of pursuing internationalization at SFU*” (SFU, 2010, p. 28).

The narrative around diversifying the student population was another strongly held theme, yet it was linked to the financial aspect. As institutions are increasingly relying on the tuition fees from international students, having one geographic region overrepresented would make a university particularly vulnerable to financial loss if potential political turmoil occurred. A Navitas administrator confirmed the reasoning around student geographic diversification as a remedy for evening out the financial base for the universities: “*I think more and more, we are seeing institutions wanting to diversify their student cohorts./.../ From a financial perspective it puts you at risk if you’re only focusing on one country*” (interview, 26 August, 2020).

Rationalization as a sensemaking strategy was utilized when administrators created a narrative around financial impetus that money would either be generated or saved for the university.

Moralization

Moralization is a sensemaking strategy that taps into socially plausible norms and values to make a controversial initiative seem appropriate and legitimate. This strategy positions the administrator as a contributor to the greater moral good. This theme was

most frequently emphasized by Navitas administrators but, in few cases, it was also evident among university administrators. One perspective that was frequently shared was that the administrators' work was highly meaningful for the good of the international students. Administrators framed their purpose with the narrative that they were people who created better opportunities in these students' lives by giving them access to quality education. They saw their role as champions who provided an opportunity for international students and, thus, enabled them to succeed in life. Such framings created a glorified perspective on the Navitas agreements as morally just through achieving equality and inclusion for those students who would not have had these opportunities otherwise.

A connected theme that framed the administrators' work as highly meaningful was created around the values of guidance and support, which created a sense of community for students. The idea of guiding students in pursuing their dreams and finding happiness was frequently shared: *"You're helping people kind of build their futures and work towards their dreams and those types of things, so that's...I mean, it's an exciting place to be"* (interview, 26 August, 2020). Another Navitas administrator reflected on how they had been able to create a sense of family abroad for international students and help them towards a smooth transition to life in Canada: *"it's a little family that we build for these students who are going through a massive life transition and it's really meaningful"* (interview, 4 September, 2020).

Finally, the theme of contributing towards world peace was also mentioned. In this case, the administrator had observed how students became politically empathetic, and they could see how they indirectly played a role in this process. The administrator commented:

"You can watch global conflict disappear, right? You can watch a student from Hong Kong and a student from China find common ground that they never thought they could./ .../ You kind of watch world peace happening." (interview, 4 September, 2020)

One university administrator emphasized the aspect of loyalty as a core moral norm related to staying in their agreement with Navitas. They reflected:

"Navitas was extremely patient with the university in terms of dealing with all of this. And, you know, there was many, many, many negative things said about Navitas, which I...I mean, it must have been hard for them to take, but they were a pretty loyal partner in all of this." (interview, 27 August, 2020)

In these examples, the administrators made sense of the controversial arrangement by creating a narrative of doing good by the students and, thus, seeing a higher meaning in their work. This theme served as a comforting sensemaking strategy that allowed the administrators to feel a sense of purpose and excitement and align their activities with higher moral value.

Narrativization

Narrativization as a strategy was apparent when administrators were telling a story that unfolded over time and pointed to long-term evidence of the success of their decisions. These stories were sometimes framed as heroic battles against opponents (deans, faculty unions), where eventually they were able to prove the rightfulness of the agreements and win over their critics. As both of the universities had renewed their Navitas agreements, the broader narrative around the wider university community becoming accepting of the agreement was frequently mentioned. Comments around others coming to realize the overall usefulness (and associated benefits) of these formal partnerships were shared. This context of wider approval and increased popularity for the arrangements made the administrators' decisions less controversial; their work came to be recognized as important and accepted, adding to the administrators' credibility as institutional leaders. The following quote illustrates how this narrative unfolded:

"I actually think as it [the partnership] went on, people felt more comfortable with it. Some people never, right, but I think the majority of people saw the benefit. Saw that they were good partners. Saw that they treated their instructors appropriately. Saw that the revenue associated with Navitas was helpful to departments in terms of having money to do things that they needed that they couldn't get elsewhere and saw that the students were transitioning much more successfully into, you know, second, third, and fourth year." (interview, 27 August, 2020)

Situating these formal partnerships in a wider context of social acceptability allowed the administrators to rely on the approval of others in positions of power to approve the agreements. In these cases, the sensemaking strategy involved gaining the wider endorsement of others, so that what was initially a single responsibility was co-shared among others in the university community.

Another example of narrativization emerged when administrators started to appreciate the work Navitas was doing for their students and they became convinced over time that student interests were prioritized. An administrator commented:

"I never would have gotten involved in the contract to begin with but we're here now, right? We're here now. /.../ I thought they [Navitas] were super committed to student success. I mean, they are a for-profit company and people can say what they want about that, but I really did believe that...I mean, sure, they wanted to make money, but I thought they were genuine in their desire to help international students succeed. I thought they were...I really thought they were a good partner." (interview, 27 August, 2020)

This quote shows how administrators' beliefs were changed over time after working with Navitas and being convinced about the quality of their programs and their efforts to put the students' needs first.

Conclusion

This study focused on the strategies that university administrators use in order to make sense of the formal public—private partnerships emerging in English-medium institutions, such as in Canada. Administrators use sensemaking strategies to create notions of coherency, success, and plausibility when dealing with controversial decisions that may create potential backlash and resistance, such as in the case of international education. This paper further shows how the sensemaking approach can provide a useful lens to further investigate commodification of knowledge that enables and legitimizes the influx of private interests into public institutions through internationalization.

There were two strategies in particular that dominated the interviews—rationalization and authorization. Rationalization around financial benefits allows administrators to utilize the dependency between financial resources and pathway college agreements. Administrators see themselves as accountable for finding new ways to compensate for the increasing public underfunding of universities. Having a long-term institutional agreement in place with a private provider secures the flow of continuous income to the institution. By using their power and position in the organization, administrators become active advocates for arrangements that are associated with labour-less cost-saving recruitment practices through private pathway colleges. The strategy of authorization reveals the significant power of policy documents. As these documents often contain overly enthusiastic objectives and performance indicators (e.g., recruitment numbers), they serve as an important measure against which administrators' leadership capabilities and expertise are assessed. The aim to achieve the goals stated in these documents, while staying within legal frameworks, similarly becomes a mechanism that supports privatization. Through these strategies, university administrators become the enablers of public—private agreements in the hopes of making up funding shortfalls.

One limitation of the study is that it draws on the English-medium higher education context and thus may only be relevant to a particular set of higher education institutions. However, while this study focused specifically on the Canadian context, the following two points are relevant to the wider discussion on internationalization. First, internationalization through pathway colleges becomes a mechanism that enforces the increased privatization of public universities. The paper shows how university senior administrators are active agents in this process when they are mandated to enhance internationalization. Second, the findings demonstrate how sensemaking strategies can be used to legitimize and normalize controversial decisions associated with internationalization. In a sense, these strategies may be used to potentially perpetuate narrow economic pursuits for universities and reinforce power hierarchies associated with internationalization. These strategies allow administrators to accept, endorse, and convince themselves and the wider university community of the appropriateness of these arrangements. The range of strategies also helps administrators to frame their internationalization work as purposeful and necessary for the survival of the university.

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