

Offshore – onshore: How international students’ expectations of the New Zealand academic environment compare to their lived experience

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Abstract

The beginning of each semester in our institution is accompanied by an increasing number of international students arriving at the International Students Coordinator’s office feeling confused, puzzled or distressed with some aspect of their study experience. Often they want to change their programme, but this can be problematic on a number of fronts: seeking approval from Immigration, the administrative time required for re-processing applications, and possible negotiations with tutors and Group Leaders. In addition, programme spaces may not always be available two or three weeks into the course and, if they are, the student can really struggle to catch up. It is clearly important to ensure that students enrol in the right programmes the first time round and one purpose of the research project described in this paper was to identify the size and scope of this issue. Forty-two current and graduate international students responded to an online survey, with follow-up focus groups (10 current students) and interviews (9 graduates) to hear what they perceived as the key areas of mismatch between expectations prior to enrolment, and their actual experience. Findings showed more than 80% believed their programme was the right one for them in terms of level and content, slightly fewer (73%) as a career pathway. Overall students felt least prepared about work options during study, and permanent residency. Most felt somewhat prepared about programme level and content, and New Zealand culture. The majority felt well prepared about English language requirements, and information about our country. The paper discusses the implications of these results for Learning Advisors and student support services.

Introduction

Few, if any practitioners in any of our student support professions – academic and pastoral, health and counselling, library and registry - would want to be without our vibrant international student body, and the attendant social, cultural and economic advantages they bring to an institution. Yet many of us often do little more than pay

¹ Fraser, C. & Simpson, P. (2012). Offshore – onshore: How international students’ expectations of the New Zealand academic environment compare to their lived experience. In M. Protheroe (Ed.) *Navigating the River: Proceedings of the 2011 Annual International Conference of the Association of Tertiary Learning Advisors of Aotearoa/New Zealand (ATLAANZ)* (pp. 1 - 15). Auckland, New Zealand: ATLAANZ.

lip service to truly understanding the factors that bring these students to our shores and those that contribute to, or inhibit their achievement. We can be all too prone to grumble about the challenges these students present for *us*, and too little aware of what is driving *them*. The research project reported in this paper was occasioned by just such a grumble, but resulted in considerable learning for the researchers themselves and the institution's representatives on the frontline of student support.

The grumble in this case was an administrative one: the institute's International Students Coordinator felt that there was an increasing tendency for students to enrol on one programme, but within days of arrival, or sometimes after a few weeks of attending class, to want to change to a different programme. Three cases in point from a single month were:

Student A from the Philippines had originally applied to a number of Australian universities but been advised that his English was not at a high enough level for direct entry. He was subsequently accepted by our institution for the NZ Diploma in Business, having been told by his agent that a completed qualification would offer a fast track to achieving residency, and that he could then relocate. However, NZ Immigration changed this policy over two years ago. The agent either was unaware of the change, or deliberately misinformed the student – or perhaps the application process was initiated while the earlier guidelines were in place. The outcome is that the student is withdrawing and we have had to refund the second semester's fees (the NZ Diploma in Business is a semester-based course). This student had never particularly valued a New Zealand sub-degree qualification as an end in itself.

Student B has a degree from India in Early Childhood Education (ECE), but her agent told her that there was no future in this area (this student also wants to achieve residency) and advised her to study IT. Because of her degree she was admitted onto the Graduate Diploma in Computing – but without the necessary practical understanding, had to drop down to the Diploma. She has since become aware that ECE *is* on Immigration's Wanted Skills list (and has been for at least the last three years, and is now going to withdraw, and will probably move onto another university's Graduate Diploma in Teaching programme, as this is not available through our institution.

Student C lasted one semester before flying home. She has a physical disability, but her real difficulty has been with the academic demands of her programme and emotional/mental health issues. Her previous education history did not prepare her for the level of study required, and her home background had not prepared her for independent living - although her agent advised her family to send her here. Her only social support is from her friend and the friend's flatmates – ironically the same agent has placed these students with PTEs in Auckland, although they are studying business and hospitality, both of which could have been done through our institution. Student C said she felt lonely and isolated, and dispirited at the difficulty in making connections with Kiwi classmates.

The main point of all three scenarios is that students felt they had had a false picture of what studying in New Zealand would entail. All three felt they would have done better with a different programme or a different location. In order for students to change or transfer their study programme, we need to apply to NZ Immigration, as the student's visa is determined by their enrolment. Immigration has recently shifted to a far more rigid policy of insisting that students maintain their original course of study, so institutions now have less flexibility to accommodate these requests. Even where changes are approved, there is a considerable investment of time required, writing letters and re-processing applications and negotiating with faculty lecturers, tutors and administrative staff. Programme spaces may not always be available two or three weeks into the course, and if they are, the student can really struggle to catch up. It is clearly important to ensure that students enrol in the right programmes the first time round. A discussion about this issue between the authors of this paper led us to the question: How does the experience of tertiary study at our institution match international students' expectations and affect the decisions they make about future directions?

Background / Literature Review

The internationalisation of our campuses

A prominent feature of higher education in New Zealand is the growing cultural diversity of the student population. The number of international students studying in our tertiary sector has increased dramatically in the last decade, as has the number of countries represented. Historically, bringing international students into our institutions was a part of the trade-aid approach to Third World development via the "Colombo Plan" in the early 1950s which New Zealand supported alongside other Commonwealth nations (Brebner, 2008). As numbers grew, government and educators began to recognise the importance of international students' presence to broaden the worldview of local students and to contribute an alternative revenue stream, and this was officially reflected in reforms in the Education Act in 1989 promoting the sale of places in universities (International Division, 2006). By the 1990s, we had become increasingly dependent on full-fee paying international students; Brebner (2008) calls this "academic capitalism", leading to our sometimes "feverish recruitment" of international students into New Zealand higher education (p. 2).

Today New Zealand is one of the five major host-countries in the English-speaking world, together with the United States, Canada, United Kingdom and Australia (Holloway, 2004) and export education is now our fourth largest export industry (Merwood, 2007). In 2010, latest enrolment figures across all education sectors show an increase of nearly 5% for the first eight months of this year, compared to last year, from 78,905 to 82,577 students (Terra Nova Consultancy, 2010). Tertiary Education Minister Steven Joyce (as cited in Terra Nova Consultancy, 2010), stated: "International education contributes at least \$2.1 billion to our economy and supports

about 32,000 jobs, so it is pleasing to see the sector continue to grow despite strong competition from Australia and other countries". He continued by saying that the government believed there was still room for considerable growth: "International students currently make up around 13% of the student roll in New Zealand universities, compared to an average of more than 20% in Australian universities". Yet these figures are already quite high: even though the United States has the largest share (20%) of international tertiary education students worldwide, their representation in the overall American student body is just over 3% (AUSSE, 2010). In contrast, international students in New Zealand already have quite a noticeable profile within the student body, which may have some bearing on their campus experience, discussed in the following section.

The changing face – and purpose - of international students

As numbers have grown, the demographic face of the international student body has been changing too. In the 1990s, students came in larger numbers from Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand than they do today. Next, it was students from China, Korea and Japan who predominated, and now their ranks are swelled by students from the Indian subcontinent (Deloitte, 2008). While we continue to host students from European and South American countries, North America and Australia (ESANA students) these groups remain a minority. Both Asian and ESANA students are international enrollees, but research has identified quite different motivations for each group, which have implications for understanding the expectation/experience divide.

Both New Zealand's Ministry of Education and the Australian Council for Educational Research regularly conduct large-scale surveys of international students in this country and concur that while ESANA students rate travel and adventure, beautiful scenery and New Zealand lifestyle as important, Asian students make choices about study destination according to perceptions of employment and residency opportunities, and quality of education providers (AUSSE, 2010; Deloitte, 2008). Only 64% of New Zealand's international students selected New Zealand as a first-choice destination, compared to 84% of international students in Australia (Deloitte, 2008) which supports the findings of Education New Zealand's study of Chinese students who voiced concern over the perceived low ranking of New Zealand universities compared to those in Australia, Canada and the UK (Ho et. al., 2005). This concern was a direct precursor to our survey questions relating to students' expectations and actual experiences of academic content and level within their programmes.

Whether or not New Zealand was a first-choice study destination, or a default means to gaining a western passport, it is clear that a large proportion of New Zealand's international students are prospective migrants. Dr Elizabeth Craven from the University of Technology in Sydney, addressed our ATLAANZ conference in 2008 and cited Robertson's (2006) study of international students' mobility, which noted that temporary residence as a student was only ever seen by many as a transitional stage. From an immigration perspective, this was not a bad thing: it allowed a "double adaption" whereby individuals could adjust first to life as a student in a foreign

university, and then as a longer term entrant into our wider society (Craven, 2009). However, for educational institutions and student support staff, it is a phenomenon many have been slow to recognise. A decade ago, it was reasonable to expect that international students were aiming to achieve a New Zealand qualification to enhance their employability in their home country. Now we are preparing them for life as a New Zealand citizen, and need to be mindful of the Australian example of favouring residency for those with appropriate Australian tertiary qualifications which has failed to guarantee employability, or even a proficiency in the English language (Craven, 2009). If we are treading the same path, small wonder that many of our students find that their study plans need adjustment after arrival (Ho, Li, Cooper, & Holmes, 2005).

The campus experience

While international students may have chosen to study outside their countries for fairly specific reasons, a common denominator is a desire to develop their English language skills as they study, while making contacts with New Zealanders, on and off campus. Yet this can be hard work, and as Ramsey, Ramsey and Mason (2007) put it,

... there is significant risk associated with attempting to have conversations with Kiwi students who may treat such conversations with disdain ... It is far less risky and much less demanding to mix with other [international] students... For these reasons when Kiwi students hear international students speaking their native languages around campus and, for cultural reasons, displaying reluctance to speak up in English during class time, they assume the international students' competence with English is worse than it really is and become more reluctant to enter into conversations with them. (p. 110)

Ramsey et al. (2007) continue with their description of the dilemma faced at Massey University, surely instantly recognisable to all tertiary staff in this field, noting that Kiwi students are often very conscious of globalisation and aspire to live and work overseas themselves. Many readily sympathise with international students' social isolation, but do not want to offer support at the expense of their own immediate education. They may be reluctant to form groups with international students for shared assignments or to see much of their class devoted to filling in the background for those from different cultural and language groups. Similarly, teaching staff today frequently feel torn between recognising that international students may require more help to adjust, but not wanting to alter their delivery of course content in any way that might promote the needs of international students over Kiwis.

International students, particularly Asian international students, therefore experience considerable, and largely unforeseen difficulties in getting to know local people and assimilating into an academic institution, due to language barriers, cultural differences and racial discrimination (Brebner, 2008; Ho et al., 2005; Ramsey et al., 2007; TEC, 2009.). This is important: several studies on friendship patterns between domestic and overseas students suggest that the paucity of intercultural contact among tertiary students can affect the cultural, emotional and psychological wellbeing of international

students (Ward & Masgoret, 2004). Other studies have correlated satisfactory and meaningful contact with host students with the academic success rate of international students (Arkoudis et al., 2010). Yet Ward's (2001) literature review of the impact of international students on domestic students and host institutions found a convergence of data evidencing a low incidence of intercultural interaction, and that international students would have welcomed more.

There can be no surprise then that this has proliferated the growth of "small world" networks of co-nationals (Brebner, 2008) which unfortunately only heighten public perceptions of difference. These tensions across our campuses are echoed in the literature from other English-speaking countries in the business of export education (International Division, 2006) and lead into the debate about what we actually mean when we talk of becoming 'internationalised'. Brebner (2008) notes that the discourse highlights the tertiary sector's "ad hoc nature and disjointed approach" (p. 2) and that academic curricula, teaching practices and delivery of student services are in need of considerable reform to promote true internationalisation. Otherwise, what we have is really more of an economic 'globalisation' through the commercialisation of international programs and activities (Brebner, 2008).

Many studies make recommendations for how a more internationalised campus can be achieved, calling for "mutuality and reciprocal cultural relations... [in] non-commercial activities within the institutions" to enable a more multicultural and critical stance of "our own cultural conditioning and national prejudice" (Welsh, 2002, as cited in Brebner, 2008, p. 3). Williams (2011) sees the curriculum as "the backbone of the internationalization process" (sic) since this is where the values, attitudes and beliefs of a particular culture and institution are reflected. She argues that an optimal learning environment must reflect the diversity of the students' cultures, perspectives and experiences and outlines three approaches she has observed to internationalising the curriculum: the add-on, the infusion, and the transformation. The latter, she says, is the most difficult to achieve, but is the most culturally inclusive and counter-hegemonic, and therefore the most desirable (Williams, 2011).

Why would we want a more truly internationalised campus? Well certainly we want to continuously improve on the quality of experience we provide for our international students, and to be seen as value-for-money in a competitive tertiary study environment. But we also stand to gain: as Merwood (2007) notes, "international students also contribute to knowledge creation and transfer within educational institutions" (p. 6), and compel the institutions themselves to strive to improve the quality of their services. If we are to acknowledge and capitalise on student diversity as a resource for learning and teaching (Arkoudis et al., 2010; International Division, 2006) and enhance student engagement (AUSSE, 2010) then we must ensure that the gaps between international students' expectations offshore, and study experience onshore, are minimised. While the Ministry of Education regularly conducts large-scale, nation-wide surveys of the sector, it is equally important that individual

institutions review and evaluate their own performance; this is the rationale behind the research described in the subsequent sections of this paper.

Methodology

Given the rationale for undertaking the research, that is, to investigate the possible trend within our institution of international students seeking to change programmes because their study experiences didn't match their pre-arrival expectations, a case study framework was selected as the most appropriate methodology. One of the early proponents of case study research was Robert K. Yin (1989) who defines the case study research method as "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context" (p. 23). Cousin (2005) says simply that case study research "aims to explore and depict a setting with a view to advancing understanding" (p. 427). In this example, a situational case study allowed the presentation, examination and interpretation of the specific experiences of students within a single education community. The collation of all respondents' viewpoints therefore provides a starting point for understanding international students' perceptions of the student experience in our institution. While a limitation of case study research is that it is necessarily sited in a fixed context, it is hoped that the overall trends noted in the findings will be broadly generalisable to other tertiary education providers.

Three instruments of data collection were employed: a survey, focus groups and interviews. The first, an online, anonymous survey using Survey Monkey was developed and trialled with two international student volunteers. The survey included an ethical statement about participation being voluntary and anonymous. In September, 2010, approximately 100 international students were contacted by e-texts and emails, explaining the purpose of the research and inviting them to participate. When the survey closed two weeks later, 42 responses were recorded. Both genders were represented (60% male, 40% female); the majority were aged between 19 and 24, then 25 to 30. Sixty-four percent were from India, with the next most common groups being Europe, China and the Pacific Islands.

Results from the questionnaire were used as a basis for questions for focus groups in the first two weeks of October. Two groups of participants who had indicated availability and contact details on their surveys, with four and six international students respectively, met for a shared lunch, provided by the researchers. The intention with the focus groups was to probe some of the responses from the questionnaire, to gather specific stories of experiences about congruency or mismatch between expectations and the onshore experience, and to elicit suggestions for strategies that BoPP could provide to assist students' assimilation. The focus groups were recorded and later transcribed.

Nine graduate students, also volunteers from the survey, were interviewed between November 2010 and February 2011, either in person and later transcribed, or electronically for those who had left Tauranga, to gain an idea of an individual's

journey as a student – from abroad to New Zealand and our institution, through study and graduation, to their next destination – whether work or a higher qualification.

Finally, all data was collated noting recurring themes from the focus groups and interviews and linking these to the statistical analysis provided by the Survey Monkey summary of results.

Findings and Discussion

Prior to departure

Most students heard about our institution from our website, agents, or from prior study through NZ secondary and language schools, as shown in Figure 1. The other sources of information about BoPP as a study destination included friends, family and past and present students.

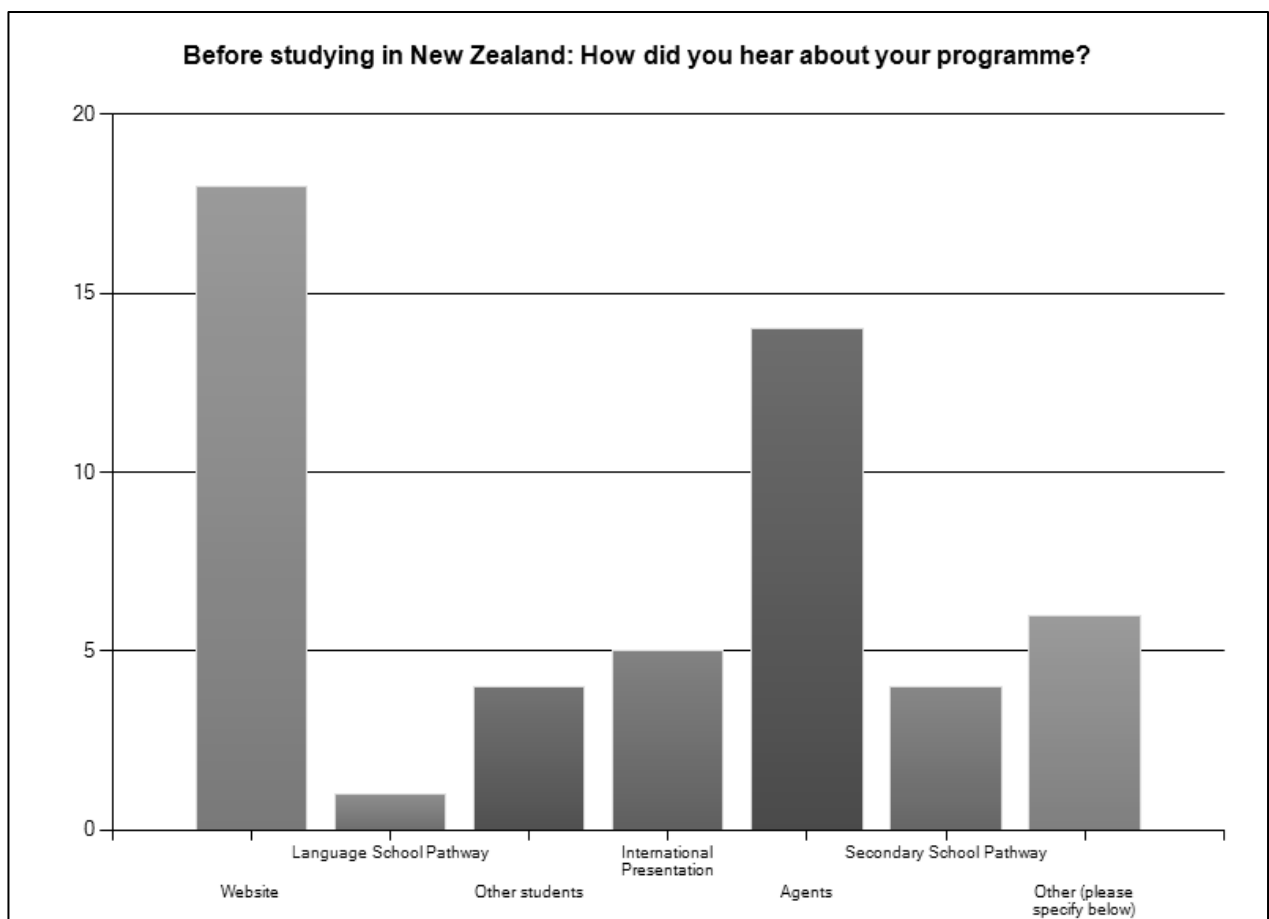


Figure 1. Sources of student information about overseas programmes (n=42)

This was an interesting result, as the Ministry of Education’s survey in 2007 (Deloitte, 2008) found that “scholarships, agents’ recommendations and advertisements for study were not strong influencers of student choice” (Executive Summary, p. 2). Yet while

our marketing department might be happy with this endorsement of their sphere of influence, frustratingly for the staff charged with coordinating support services for international students, fewer than 30% of the participants had accessed the institution's pre-departure information on the website.

As predicted by the literature, future job opportunities and interest in the subject were the two most prominent determinants of programme selection (named by 27 and 29 students), although 39% (16 students) also indicated that overseas study experience was important to them. Other considerations were work availability while studying (6 students), weather and lifestyle (6 students), cultural diversity (6 students), the English language medium (5 students), a stable political environment and perception of safety (4 students each), and their first choice wasn't available (3 students). In follow up focus groups and interviews with representative survey participants, only one of our interviewees mentioned the reputation and ranking of the institution.

Research (AUSSE, 2008; 2010; Deloitte, 2008;) has established that students who have been living in New Zealand for longer and are potentially better assimilated into our society and culture are more satisfied with their education experience and find less dissonance with their expectations. This would suggest an advantage to enrolling students who are pathwaying from other New Zealand education providers such as secondary and language schools. Our institution has never formally measured the breakdown of where our students come from, and we were quite surprised to find that, for over 80% of our participants, New Zealand was their first study experience outside their home country, where we had expected a larger number to have come from the secondary or language school sectors. These findings may suggest that our students are likely to be particularly vulnerable to social isolation, loneliness, cultural dislocation and language barriers, as discussed by Ho et al. (2005), although none of our interviewees or focus group participants referred to any concerns other than the language issue - perhaps the individuals involved were more outgoing and self-sufficient than the norm, or perhaps they had simply progressed beyond the fraught experience of their first few months.

During study

Students were asked to respond to how well prepared they felt they were, using a scale of responses from "*Not well prepared – I had some idea – Very well prepared*". The results are shown in Figure 2, with 0 representing a sense of poor preparation, and 3 a sense of complete preparation. Where the final column "*All other responses*" sums up aggregated responses to three questions about Tauranga – size and location, transport options, and accommodation options and cost.

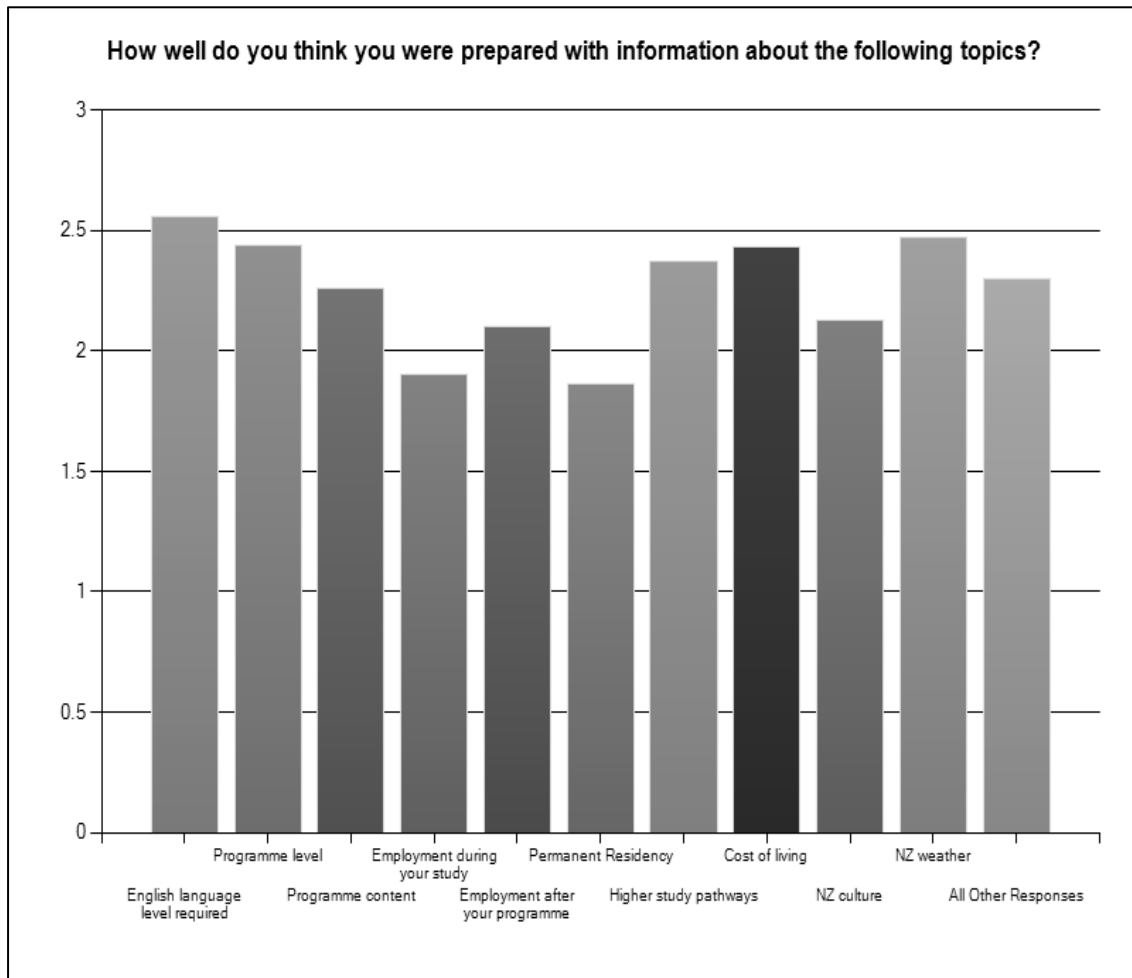


Figure 2. Averaged perceptions of preparedness for student life in New Zealand (n=42)

Students felt least prepared about work options during study, and permanent residency. Focus group and graduate student discussion indicated that many had relied on agent advice and hearsay about these issues, and had made assumptions that both these areas would be accessible and achievable. In the words of one of our interviewees:

My immediate plan was to get an IT job relevant to my studies ... they did not worked out because I am still looking for it.

Other unanticipated difficulties were mostly about transport and, for some, the types and number of course assessments, although 12% were also disappointed by accommodation options.

Most participants felt somewhat prepared about programme level and content, and New Zealand culture. Many had had some communication with present or past students – either from our own or other Australasian tertiary institutions – and had received programme information in advance of enrolment.

The majority felt well prepared about English language requirements for their programme, and information about the location: city size and geographic location, cost of living, transport, accommodation and weather. In focus groups and interviews, students told us this was because they had surfed the internet, or had had conversations with people who had been to New Zealand. This probably represents a growing familiarity with New Zealand as an education destination, since an earlier study had found that the majority of students knew very little about the country prior to arrival (Ho et al., 2005).

Today's international students are likely more savvy about researching their host country and education provider. In our study, more than 80% believed their programme was the right one for them in level and content, slightly fewer (73%) as a career pathway. This indicated that the issue of students upset over their programme level and/or content which had prompted this research inquiry, was not as widespread as we had feared, and that the students seeking to change courses or institutions were the likely extent of the issue, rather than the tip of the iceberg. When we asked students if the institution was what they had expected, 92% said "Yes" about the learning environment, 85% about the support services, including Learning Advisors, 80% about the class size, 78% about the class sizes, 69% about their classmates, and the same number about cultural diversity.

When students described their responses to both sport and leisure options and social opportunities, just under a half chose "*sometimes*" or "*I'm disappointed by it*"; slightly over a half chose "*I love it*":

They people I met here and the group and the small family formed here, I never expected that, I would have a home far away from home, everyone taking care of each other as they never did before; this is one unexpected thing I experienced.

Most funny and enjoyable place of the polytechnic is the cafeteria. There is one Ping Pong table and another is Pool Table and having a match on those tables gives you energy whether you win it or lose it.

However, one of the key concerns for international students identified in the literature is that of intercultural interaction, and this was most evident in the focus group discussions, where our participants talked about how hard it was to make Kiwi friends. The majority were on acquaintanceship terms with classmates, but these were mostly what Ward (2001) has called "hi-bye friends, not close friends" (p. 6). Participants generally agreed that while their primary bonds were with co-nationals, they would have liked closer social contact with New Zealanders.

At the time of the study, our institution did not offer English language programmes. Instead, students whose IELTS (International English Language Testing System)

levels did not meet entry requirements, or who were interviewed and assessed as needing extra language tuition before acceptance onto a programme were referred to Education Tauranga partners. However, the institution had been considering re-establishing foundation English language programmes to provide an internal study pathway, and had asked us to include this in our project. Students were therefore asked in the survey, and again in focus groups and interviews, whether they would have liked the option to have enrolled in English language classes before or during their programme had these been available. Sixty-eight percent (27 students) said “Yes” in the survey, but when this response was probed further in discussions, almost all felt that they would not be able or inclined to pay extra for this. Despite the fact that all these students had achieved the prerequisite IELTS level for acceptance onto the programme, almost all felt that their proficiency with conversational English language created a barrier to learning and easy acculturation, particularly our accent, and colloquialisms. Many focus group participants noted that it took them a whole semester to feel that they had settled in; those who had arrived a few weeks earlier or pathwayed from secondary schools or language schools felt better adjusted to commence study.

In a final response worth noting, many students made comments about the difference in teaching and learning between New Zealand and their home country in terms of class size, leniency, participation, group work, the lack of tolerance for plagiarism, and the level of support services available. Almost all comments were favourable to their current programme, compared to their home tertiary study experiences.

Future plans

Although predictable from the literature review, it came as a surprise for many teaching and support staff that the majority of students were planning to stay in New Zealand after completing their qualifications: either to work, study, and/or pursue permanent residency. Students said that the prospect of gaining permanent residency and professional employment in New Zealand was one of, if not *the* primary reason for qualification and destination decisions, with less than a quarter of students planning to return to their own country to work on completion of their New Zealand programme. For most, these plans had not changed since arrival, reinforcing the need for institutions to recognise the motivations international students have for studying abroad in pre-enrolment planning and communications.

Present and graduate students had clear ideas about what advice and /or information they believed it would have been helpful to have received before they arrived, and future briefing letters for international students will incorporate these. Points students made included:

- Meet staff before you start to build relationships
- Need good command of conversational English as there is a communication gap, and this is essential for group work and building friendships with classmates

- Focus on learning technical language
- Colloquialisms, so you can understand what's being communicated inside and outside of class and don't feel so much the foreigner
- Understand the Kiwi culture and have an open mind. Don't expect to fit in immediately or blame yourself if other students are slow to include you. But equally, try not to spend all your free time with your own national group.
- Pre-learn the subject to be studied – basic knowledge to lay the foundation for learning on arrival.

Implications for the institution and for Learning Advisors

The research findings firstly clarified that the experience of the students in the scenarios cited at the beginning of this paper, who had applied to change programmes early in their study pathway due to the content or level not matching their pre-study expectations, were not widely shared by the larger international student population who chose to participate in this research. The majority of the students surveyed and interviewed were comfortable with the learning and considered that they were fairly well, or well prepared. Several of the findings supported trends widely discussed in the literature, such as the persistence of language as a barrier, the desire for rewarding social interactions with fellow students as well as the wider community, and the intention of migration.

For the institution, the study has confirmed the need for on-going education and close communication with international education agents, not just to ensure currency, but also to enable them to reiterate to students the social aspects of studying in a foreign, western culture. It has reinforced the intention to resume English language programmes, and to provide English language specialist staff for international students as a transition to enrolment in mainstream programmes, and this provision has been implemented. It has also meant additional staffing support for the International Student Coordinator and a closer focus for the entire Information Services team who process applications. Results have been shared with teaching staff and discussions led in teams about how better social and study interaction between local and international students can be nurtured, inside and outside the classroom.

For Learning Advisors, the comments about the difficulties for international students of living and learning in an English-speaking environment bear out the daily experience of our jobs. It has prompted us to revisit strategies for working with these students in small study groups, as well as individually, and to look at the resources we are able to refer them to. We did run a trial of a free, weekly English language lesson in a lunchtime, but found that, while the students who attended it enjoyed the sessions and found them valuable, numbers attending dropped off as students became immersed in their own study and assessment requirements. Although studies of our student populations such as recounted here offer no epiphanies of understanding, or quick-fix solutions, our team of learning support staff, and indeed the wider institution, have

gained useful insights and reminders of the drivers, needs and concerns of our international students – and that’s always a good thing.

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