

International tertiary students in New Zealand: Cold facts or warm people?

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Abstract

It is not difficult to uncover the statistics underpinning the numbers of international tertiary students who have opted to enrol in New Zealand polytechnics, universities and with Private Training Providers, starting with a 2013 report which showed that the international education industry was worth an estimated \$2.6 billion to the economy in 2012. However, it is not so obvious as to why these students came to Aotearoa initially nor if they have been satisfied with their time here. This paper looks behind the economics and reflects on the highs and lows of their experience using a variety of data gathered by researchers over the last decade from New Zealand, Australia and North America. In particular, it focuses on the nature of students, including their countries of origin, their preferred fields of study and whether they consider they had got value for money from their education and qualifications. The paper continues with an analysis of the findings and attempts to identify ways in which New Zealand providers can better meet the pedagogical and social challenges facing this group of students. It concludes with recommendations for improvements to our current educational provision.

Background

“International education is very important to New Zealand. It contributes \$2.6 billion a year to our economy and 28,000 jobs for New Zealanders, plus it helps build strong linkages with the countries that are our trading future,” (Tertiary Education, Skills and Employment Minister Steven Joyce, 2013).

With statistics of this nature it is clear that the market for international students is a significant one for the New Zealand economy, being currently the country's 5th most valuable export. Evidently, it is a successful business model for the country; however, the question has to be asked: do the students get a good deal for their time and money?

Information about the level of satisfaction indicates that the experiences of international tertiary students have improved over the last decade, based on the results of surveys carried out for the Ministry of Education (iGraduate, 2011,2012; Ward & Masgoret, 2004). Specific issues, highlighted as being responsible for this improvement, will be discussed later in this paper in addition to overarching changes in the quality of educational providers.

Students choose to come to New Zealand to study for a variety of reasons. Ward and Masgoret (2004) indicated that for Chinese and South Korean students the primary reason to select this country was based on a perceived level of high quality educational provision as well as good value for money. Whereas, for many other nationalities (European and South American) the main attraction was scenery, the outdoor life style and culture. However, the nature of the tertiary institution attended, i.e. whether university, polytechnic or Private Training Establishment (PTE) did not

factor highly in their report although they did note that ‘Students in language schools were less satisfied than those in secondary and tertiary institutions’ (p.10). For most students, although many ultimately rely on the services of overseas agents, the key factor in decision making is the advice they receive from friends who have already received gained qualifications in New Zealand. For this reason, as well as ethical responsibilities to provide a quality education, it is vital that students enrolled in tertiary studies in Aotearoa are satisfied with their experiences.

The people

Issues behind the statistics

The information on enrolments based on the origins of the students (Ministry of Education, 2014) indicates the importance of the ‘top five’ source countries of fee-paying students during 2013 – China, India, Japan, South Korea, and Saudi Arabia. Students from China (31.7%) and India (25.9%) are key markets for the 18 institutes of technology/polytechnics while Chinese students made up the single largest proportion of fee-paying enrolments in the eight New Zealand universities (42.3%).

To look beyond the statistics, awareness of the Chinese university entrance system, the *gaokao* or annual examination, allows New Zealand educators an opportunity to appreciate the human side of the international students seated in front of them. In June 2014 some 9.8 million students competed for 6.5 million university places over three intense days. At the end of this time, the most fortunate ones went to high quality universities in the main cities in China. Some went to lesser known universities in the provinces. Others, often reluctantly, enrolled with Vocational education institutions which are regarded nationally as second-class establishments, to undertake Diplomas or Certificates. A few individuals committed suicide and the remainder – limited to those whose parents could afford it – applied to overseas universities and other tertiary institutions.

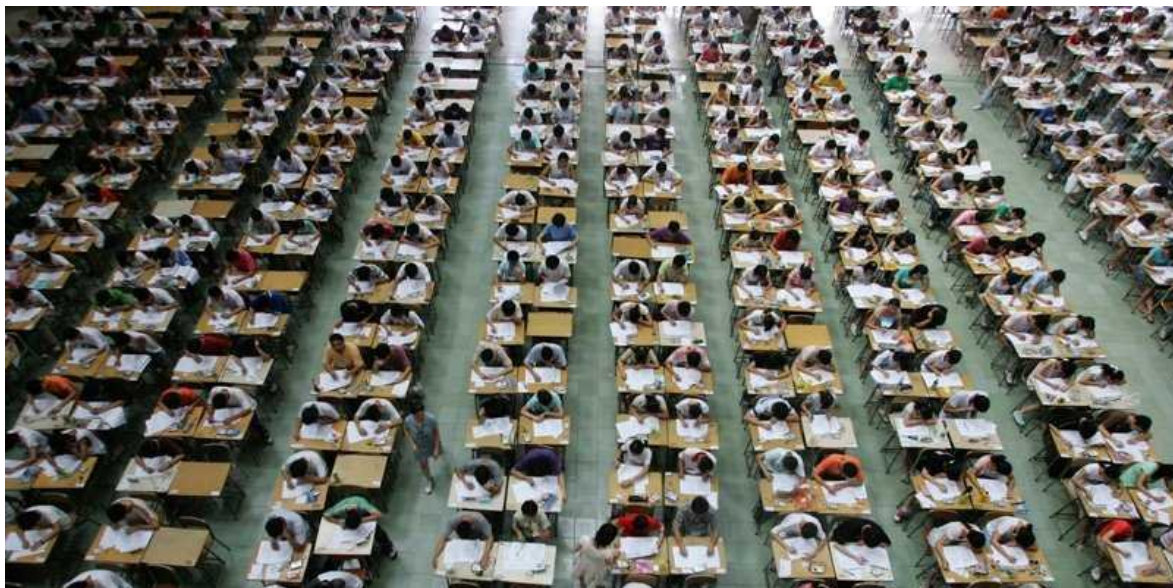


Figure 1: Students taking *Guakao* at Dongguan University (courtesy of Reuters)

These figures highlight the fact that in many cases the Chinese students enrolled in New Zealand polytechnics and PTEs already see themselves as educational failures – although this is possibly not the case for those who have chosen to come to our universities. This should be understood by their lecturers in terms of the feelings being experienced by new Chinese arrivals. The mental states of new enrollees may involve issues of low self-esteem, which, when combined with language problems and the natural confusion of arriving in a foreign institution must create a situation of maximum bewilderment. We have to ask ourselves whether we factor this into our relationship with our new students.

While this situation is specific to students from China, other countries are not immune to their own individual issues. For example, while the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has been actively encouraging its young people of both sexes, to complete their tertiary education in the west, the majority of those who take up this opportunity are males. The young men who come to our institutions from Saudi Arabia in the main are active and enthusiastic learners, and provide one another with strong social support networks. However, this support frequently does not extend to the women who may be studying beside them and who often suffer from overt discrimination from their male compatriots.

Fields of study

Although data is not readily available in New Zealand on the preferred fields of study it is likely to be similar to that pertaining in the United States (Institute of International Education, 2010). This report showed that Business and Management remains the most popular field of study for international students in the United States, comprising 21% percent of the total, followed by Engineering which contributed a further 18% of the total. Math and Computer Science also increased significantly in 2009/10, up 8% from the prior year. Intensive English Language, which declined last year by 1%, saw a 9% further decline in enrolments.

Pedagogical and social challenges

It should not be surprising that for all international students from countries where English is not the home language, being expected to receive instruction in English can be a huge barrier, despite the language requirements institutions place on enrollees. What is more worrying is the extent to which students fail to understand the information they are given. A study by Johnson (2008) of first year university students in New Zealand showed that international participants estimated they had understood less than 30% of lecture content, while those in their later years were still only following between 70%-90%. This failure appeared to be due to a range of issues, the main ones being:

- Lecturers' accents (Indian, South African, Russian etc.),
- Terminology associated with their particular discipline,
- Unfamiliar assessment terminology such as 'evaluate, discuss, reflect',
- Lengthy monologues without opportunities for consolidating information.

In addition to language difficulties, international students are also faced with a number of social problems, similar to those of domestic students, but amplified through cultural separation. These may extend to difficulties with accommodation,

obtaining familiar food, isolation and the perception of low self-esteem mentioned earlier. In some cases these issues may be compounded by financial or family complications. And although 70% of international students wanted to make friends with New Zealander classmates (Ward & Masgoret, 2004), 35% said that they had not made any local friendships - proportions which have not greatly altered over the decade .

A study of International students' communication styles

How students learn and communicate has to be fundamental to their successful integration into their programmes. The difficulties faced by international students when studying in Australia have previously been investigated by Robertson, Line, Jones and Thomas (2000). Their study shows that lecturers particularly identified poor critical thinking skills amongst their international students.

Recently, a similar investigation (McAfee, Potangaroa & Panko, in print) has been carried out in New Zealand using the Casse Survey Instrument (1981) to probe the communication styles of entry-level international trades students, as this tool not only considers the ethnic diversity of the respondents but also relates value orientations to the four different communications styles identified by Casse (see Table 1).

Table 1: Value orientations associated with different communication styles (Casse, 1981)

Communication style	Action	Process	People	Ideas
Value orientation	Doing, achieving, getting things done	Facts, organisation, strategies	Teamwork, relations, communication	Concepts, theories, innovation
Content characteristics - they talk about ...	Results, objectives, performance, productivity, efficiency, moving ahead, responsibility, feedback, experience, challenges, achievements, change and decisions	Facts, procedures, planning, organising, controlling, testing, trying, analysis, observations, proof and details	People, needs, motivations, teamwork, communications, feelings, team spirit, understanding, sensitivity, awareness, cooperation, beliefs, values, expectations, relations and self-development	Concepts, new ways, innovation, new methods, creativity, improving, opportunities, problems, possibilities, potential, grand designs, alternatives, issues, what's new in the field, interdependence
Process characteristics	Pragmatic, direct, impatient, decisive, quick energetic and challenge others	Systematic, logical, factual, verbose, unemotional, cautious and patient	Spontaneous, empathetic, warm, subjective, emotional, perceptive and sensitive	Imaginative, charismatic, difficult-to-understand, ego-centred, unrealistic, creative, full of ideas and provocative

Casse proposed that individuals generally possess a combination of all four value orientations - Action, Process, People and Ideas, but tend to dominate in one of the four. For the 2014 study questionnaires, adapted from Casse (1981), were issued to 113 students enrolled in the Certificate of Applied Technology Automotive programme across 7 theory classes. All the students who participated were in their first year of study, either in their first or second semester, and were all male.

The survey comprised 40 questions and students were asked to make a choice out of the pair of alternative answers provided in each case. At the end of the series of questions participants were required to identify their ethnicity by selecting up to three categories from the ethnicities recognised by their institution.

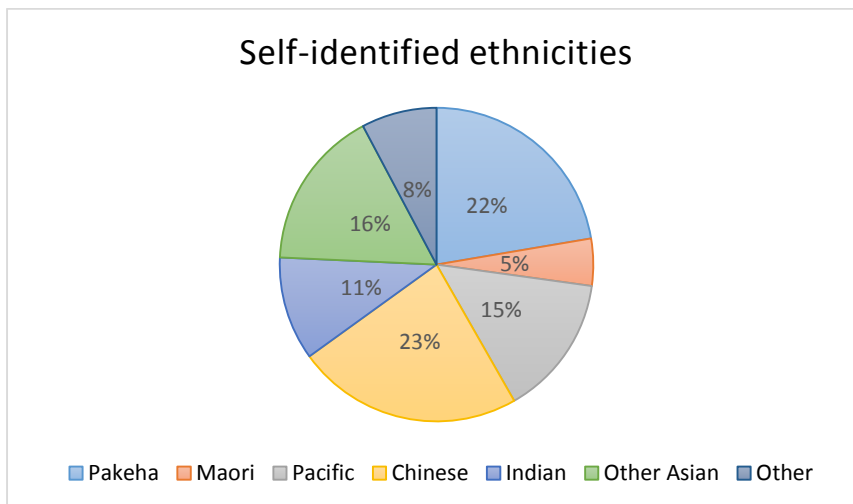


Figure 2: Identities of survey ethnicities

The findings of this survey showed that the majority of international students from India, South East Asia and the Pacific had high values for the 'People' orientation but scored significantly least for the 'Ideas' category, whereas the 'Ideas' category, demanded by the graduate profiles of their programmes of study, was dominant amongst Pakeha and European participants.

This indicates that there is yet one more hurdle for many international students to cross while they learn to modify their responses to the types expected by their teachers. Because, according to the requirements of their graduate profile, by the time they complete their studies, they need to be innovative, capable and able to problem solve. In other words, according to the Casse (1981) model, while initially they feel at home with attitudinal values from the 'People' domain such as teamwork, cooperation, beliefs, shared values, expectations and self-development - many are unaccustomed or reluctant to consider new concepts, opportunities, problems, possibilities, or potentially innovative applications. Collectively the latter are considered essential skills that must be acquired by the end of their studies and can be classified as 'Ideas' values within the Casse model.

This means that teaching techniques have to gradually enable students to transform their approaches to teaching and learning, preferably by developing their innovative characteristics using attributes already present within their 'People' sensitive values. Other researchers who have identified similar problems (Baker & Panko, 1998) have postulated that 'best practice' teaching, developed with international learners in

mind, frequently can be found to benefit the learning experience of all students in the classroom, whether New Zealanders or from other countries.

Satisfaction with their education

Over the last decade a transformation has taken place in the reactions of international students towards their education in New Zealand. The report by Ward and Masgoret (2004) showed clearly that ten years ago many students were unhappy about their experiences in this country. Chinese students, followed by South Korean, were the least satisfied by New Zealand tertiary education, and this is particularly true of those who were based in Auckland or Christchurch. This feeling extended from the quality of their learning, their lack of opportunities to develop cross-cultural friendships and general dissatisfaction with their accommodation. However, it should be noted that similar findings have been reported across 40 other countries by other authors (Schimmack, Oishi & Diener, 2002) after examining the satisfaction of Chinese university students. While it was suggested that this response could be due to a cultural tendency to recall negative experiences, it might also be due to an expectation of higher quality, or at least, more demanding educational activities similar to those experienced when they were secondary students.

More recent surveys (iGraduate 2011 & 2012) reveal that the majority of the 7,601 PTE and Polytechnic students and 15,040 University students have now identified exceptionally high satisfaction levels with the quality of their learning and the teaching available, in particular: valuable lectures, virtual learning and good teachers. In addition, they highly rated a number of organisational support services:

- Registration (95%),
- Finance Office (94%),
- Meeting staff (94%),
- Opportunity to make friends from their home country (94%) and
- Opportunity to make friends from other countries on arrival [(93%) excluding New Zealand students].

All of these elements were above the global benchmark average. Over half of this group of international students were enrolled at Diploma level; the remainder of the sample was spread between Graduate Diploma, Degree, Advanced Diploma and Certificate level. This emphasis on Diploma enrolments reinforces the understanding that many international students are not considered to have a satisfactory standard to undertake higher level study on arrival in New Zealand.

Furthermore, this positive change in students' satisfaction means that in 2014, an overall 76% of international students would recommend their institution to friends at home thinking of applying to institutions in New Zealand. Although this is 3% below the average of the global benchmark, large variations exist between New Zealand PTE institutions as to whether students would recommend their institution, with scores that ranged between 60% - 100%. This range indicates that there could still be some institutions failing to reach the standards required by students and their families.

The remaining areas of concern are still transport links, and for Auckland students in particular, the cost of accommodation. However, issues more closely related to their

educational experience, such as lectures, discipline learning and Internet access appear to have measurably improved and the possible reasons for this transformation are discussed below.

Transformational changes

There are two main reasons for the migration in students' satisfaction with their education which are common to both domestic and international learners and they both lie with a tightening of policy by government agencies. The two agencies are the New Zealand Qualification Authority (NZQA) and the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC).

Although the NZQA has been operating under a slightly different guise for more than twenty years, since 2010 it has ensured that the New Zealand Qualification Framework (NZQF) is being applied robustly in all tertiary education organisations other than universities. Academic quality for universities is overseen by the CUAP (Committee on University Academic Programmes) and AQA (Academic Quality Agency for NZ Universities).

The NZQF is designed to:

- provide information about the skills, knowledge and attributes a graduate gains by completing a qualification,
- provide a clear education pathway, to establish what further education the qualification leads to,
- enable and support the development of integrated and coherent qualifications,
- give confidence in the quality and international comparability of New Zealand qualifications,
- contribute to the strengthening of Māori as a people by enhancing and advancing Mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge),
- be sustainable and robust.

In other words, the NZQA directly oversees the standard of all qualifications provided by educational organisations.

In conjunction with the NZQA, TEC is responsible for administering all forms of post-secondary school education and training by giving effect to the Government's Tertiary education strategy. Essentially this involves funding and managing the performance of the entire tertiary education sector. This role allows the TEC to monitor information on the educational performance of tertiary education organisations based on agreed educational performance indicators. This includes details about overall course and qualification completions. In the future, this may also include information on the employment outcomes of study.

The result of the actions of these agencies has been to force PTEs and Polytechnics to modify their programmes, to improve the delivery of their courses and in a number of cases, to close altogether. The number of PTEs in New Zealand has dropped from over 700 in 2004 to 541 in 2014, a process which radically improved the educational offerings of the tertiary education sector.

Not all the institutions that have closed have necessarily been at an inadequate standard, but many have fallen foul of the as process of external evaluation and review, or "EER" as the quality assurance system is known, with which PTEs are legally required to participate. More than anything else, this forced compliance has ensured that the standards of Polytechnics and PTEs have risen, resulting in the increased levels international student satisfaction described earlier.

One additional influence had an impact on the performance of PTEs over that time has been modifications to New Zealand immigration policy which has while still allowing international students to work while studying, has raised the quality standards required from education providers enrolling international students, as it no longer grants visas to students seeking to enrol at the few providers in NZQA Category 4.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Much has improved within the non-university sector of tertiary education in New Zealand over the last decade, and these changes have benefited domestic students as much as international ones. To a large extent the increase in students' satisfaction indices has been due to strategic policies implemented by the Ministry of Education via the NZQA and TEC being implemented at institutional levels.

However, the world of educational standards is a moving target driven by international competition and changing expectations of technologically savvy students. Looking at the areas still needing improvement – and to a certain extent, less covered by the surveys – there are two main fields that require additional effort both by teachers of international students and the organisations that rely on their enrolments.

The first of these are continuing improvements to teaching techniques, ensuring that students are gradually encouraged to become familiar with the Socratic questioning processes favoured in western classrooms. Ideally, this transformation should enable them to use their strengths in the 'People' domain (Casse, 1981) to become able to problem-solve and innovate. As motivation is shown to increase when people are able to relate what they are learning to their own experiences, opportunities need to be provided to enable students to examine case studies and examples from their home countries and then share this knowledge with their colleagues, for the mutual benefit of all. This expansion of the Community of Practice approach (Wenger, 2011) can be stimulated by the use of a variety of social technologies, systems that the majority of present-day students are already familiar with. The difficulty here is frequently lecturers' lack of knowledge and preparation for using such tools (Johnson, 2008), rather than difficulties on the part of the students.

The range of blended eLearning mechanisms offers great potential for students of all nationalities to develop their reflective and critical thinking skills, demanded by tertiary courses at every level. It also can encourage people to work together in teams which allow them to use their pre-existing relationship skills.

The second area that still needs work is the enhancement of cultural inclusiveness and more active attempts by tertiary educational organisations to provide

opportunities for relationships to develop between domestic and international students. One approach that has been successful in this regard is the use of team competitions, where activities are focussed on the discipline the students are studying. This can provide a relaxed atmosphere in which mutual respect can be developed while attitudinal changes are slowly brought about. Such an activity can be used at the start of their study to help the students not only see the relevance of practice to their discipline but also allow them to develop bonds across the nationalities.

Much has already been done to reinforce the pastoral care of international students in New Zealand through the Code of Practice but while students from overseas are still reporting examples of discrimination, both outside their educational organisations as well as from within, we will not be able to be certain that we are satisfying their educational needs or providing them with the experiences they have anticipated.

Finally, while remembering the economic value of international students to the educational system in New Zealand, we have to bear in mind that each one is undertaking a potentially life-changing experience and the success or failure of that process is in our hands.

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