

Do they stay or do they go? The first destinations of international student graduates

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Abstract

It is interesting to read about international student graduates' actual outcomes related to employment, career development, enrolment into higher qualifications and achieving permanent residence. These outcomes often come as a surprise to those who work most closely with the students – that is, faculty, academic advisors and learning support staff – who have long recognised this student population as high-users of academic development services. This paper discusses the findings from a survey of international graduates from a New Zealand institution over the last five years. Our data support a phenomenon widely discussed in the recent literature: that temporary residence as a student is, for many, only ever seen as a transitional stage, and in fact a large proportion of New Zealand's international students are prospective migrants. Further, a number of studies indicate that this trend is equally apparent in North American institutes, and other western providers of tertiary level, English medium qualifications. The pathways by which the students achieve their goals begin with the programmes they study and the qualifications they achieve, and lead into the decisions students make about their first destination upon graduation. Our research extended the survey results by undertaking a number of interviews to gather individual stories to explore an idea of the explanations and motivations that lie behind the larger numerical patterns. The important corollary for teaching and advising staff is to recognise these student aspirations in the support and services we are providing. Key focus areas include language testing, more rigorous translation of previous qualifications, staffing numbers for academic support and an even more comprehensive screening of students accepted onto courses than we currently undertake.

Introduction

According to Merwood (2007), the benefits of export education to New Zealand are significant: “As New Zealand's fourth largest export industry, the annual financial gain alone (of internationals student enrolments) is estimated at over two billion dollars in foreign exchange” (p. 6). Therefore, understanding how to capitalise on this is very important for the institutions that recruit and host the students. A continuing

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trend in the emergence of new players in the international education market in the past decade is of interest. Australia, New Zealand, the Russian Federation, Spain and also Korea have all noted increases in numbers of international students compared to a decline in numbers in the more traditional destinations, such as Germany and the United States.

International students bring vibrancy and richness to a learning institution, but also much needed revenue. There is a competitive environment surrounding recruitment of these students, which means that what is being promised to the students, must in turn be delivered. This includes living arrangements, social environments, sightseeing and more but with a particular emphasis on the academic course delivering what has been promised and ensuring the direct relevance of that course content to employment.

The support systems available to these international students must be sound. These support systems include: extensive pastoral care, supplementary language assistance, and targeted academic support. The assurances offered to students intending to study in New Zealand – of achieving qualifications that are at a standard comparable to qualifications achieved in leading educational institutions in other parts of the world – must be upheld (NZQA, 2014). It is widely acknowledged that the quality of learning experiences is usually a reflection of the students' experience in the classroom and how their learning is facilitated.

Background/literature review

As the number of international students enrolling in our tertiary education sector is increasing, the cultural multiplicity of the student population in New Zealand is becoming increasingly diverse. 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). In research prepared for the Ministry of Education, Deloitte (2008) states that:

International students are a vibrant part of our education sector providing immense benefit not only to our economy but also to New Zealand education providers, educators and domestic students. The exposure we get from their overseas thinking helps raise New Zealand education standards, and the people-to-people connections established are important for young people as they increasingly operate in a global marketplace. (p. 1)

With a reputation as a provider of quality education offering a diverse range of excellent study opportunities, New Zealand is certainly a popular choice for foreign students. Research by Ward and Masgoret (2004) lists five important factors in students selecting New Zealand as a place of study: the English speaking environment, safety, the international recognition of New Zealand qualifications, the quality of the education and the cost. The authors identify three aspects of less importance related to what we have come to know as the “Kiwi Experience”

– the natural beauty of the country, the “Kiwi lifestyle”, cultural and adventure opportunities.

Coupled with our reputation as a safe environment in which to live, it is paramount the education sector maintain these high standards upon which our reputation is based (New Zealand Tourism Guide, 2014). In order to ensure standards are maintained and international students afforded an assurance of a high standard of pastoral care to meet their needs, education providers in New Zealand are required to be signatories to the Code of Practice for the Pastoral Care of International Students (New Zealand Tourism Guide, 2014). This acknowledges and formalises our commitment to student care, both in and out of the classroom.

Many – if not most – educational institutions use agents to recruit students and these agents should be well versed on all aspects of the students’ stay with regard to necessary entry qualifications including English level, course content and pathways from the initial qualification the student will undertake. It would also be of benefit to both the student and the learning institution to have some idea of the student’s intention upon completion of their study. Will they return to their country of origin? Are they considering further tertiary study? Do they intend to apply for residency? Ward and Masgoret (2004) found that while most students used agents to assist with their arrangements for study in New Zealand, the agents they used were generally from their own country. Those who used New Zealand agents reported that they provided better services but the overall theme was that satisfaction with agents’ services was not high – only one quarter of those who used agents were very or extremely satisfied.

Methodology

The methodology for the study comprised two data collection instruments – an online questionnaire and one-on-one interviews. Mixed methods research takes advantage of using multiple ways to explore a research problem and enabled us to explain and interpret our data statistically, using graphs and percentages with student voices adding depth and richness to our findings. Using this approach we were able to gather an overall view as well as an in depth picture of our graduate students’ journey from early decision making to first destinations after completing study at our organisation.

Online questionnaire

The mostly quantitative 38 question survey collected data about students’ study outcomes in association with their career and lifestyle aspirations. Analysis revealed a number of relationships, trends and patterns which were then probed through one-on-one interviews. Although based on a series of templated questions, these did allow us flexibility to explore more spontaneous answers and explanations.

The email with the Survey Gizmo link and accompanying explanation and documentation was sent to all international student graduates from the past five

years whose contact details we were able to locate. PROMIS enrolment details were used and when these were lacking, email addresses, backfilling the gaps as much as possible from the International team's student files, in particular the International Student Coordinator's databases, were used instead. This was a fairly lengthy process, which took the three researchers several hours to complete.

We sent out just over 500 emails, hoping for a response rate somewhere between 25% and 33%, a figure we believed to be safely conservative, based on the 12 current students from a target group of 27 whom we asked for help in testing an early draft of the survey. However, our final tally was 76 responses, or about 15%. This, according to Survey Gizmo (donnasacks, 2010), is actually what we should have been expecting: 10-15% is an average response rate for external surveys. In fact, the same source notes "response rates can also fall below 2% (about one response for every 50 invitations sent) when the respondent population is less-targeted, when contact information is unreliable, or where there is less incentive or little motivation to respond" (para. 5). As all of these conditions applied to some extent, in this light, the size of our participant sample group would appear to have been considerably more successful!

As a brief observation about the reliability, or otherwise, of contact information, we noted that many of the students' email addresses were with Hotmail or Gmail and often had typically "student" nicknames rather than "professional" identification tags. It is highly likely that a very large number of those used by students several years ago, when they first enrolled with us, are no longer functioning; therefore, it is difficult to ascertain what proportion of our target population actually received our invitation. This is a key gap for our institution: the lack of regular and routine follow up which might have kept better track of past students' contact details, and the lack of a web presence where alumni can update these themselves and communicate with us.

Survey Gizmo was selected as the online survey instrument as it was freely available: the Manager of Taorangahau already had a licence, and there were fewer internal surveys underway than was the case with Survey Monkey, the alternate choice which is more widely used by staff. It was felt the limited access meant that it was easier to contain data, should any of the responses have contained potentially damaging or inflammatory comments (none did).

Unfortunately, Survey Gizmo's operational design requires that at the end of the fifth page of questions, the participant clicks a button at the bottom of the page with the invitation to "Load more pages". We had eight pages – therefore this process became part of our survey. None of our pilot participants mentioned this, and there was no pattern to their responses to indicate we needed to pay attention to this factor. Yet when we started to get responses from the open survey, we realised that we were getting a number of "partial" responses, and that several students appeared to be stopping at this point. However, because the survey is anonymous, we had no way of contacting the individuals and explaining the next step.

We attempted to rectify this by adding an explicit instruction in our follow up emails; nonetheless, it appears that when several of our graduates did not see any further questions to answer, they still clicked out of the survey and submitted it. Of the 76 responses, 19 were “partial”, meaning that respondents completed some, but not all of the survey. In order for their responses to be collated into the automatically generated report, we had to re-assign these as “complete”, although we are still able to identify actual numbers of respondents per individual question.

Follow-up interviews

Finally, one-on-one interviews with 25 graduates were conducted. These were over the phone, via Skype or face to face, depending on whether they were in local employment or in further study based in New Zealand, or whether they had returned to their country of origin or travelled to another country. This contributed to more in depth observations regarding where the students had gone and what they had done after graduation. Several of these interviews were developed further into case-study narratives, which provided more specific insight and explanation into the pathways our students chose or were directed into, after graduating.

Summary of research findings

When asked how well the programmes studied prepared respondents for their first choice destination after study, 46% responded that they felt very well prepared and 48% felt somewhat prepared. Delving further into these statistics, we found that 27% found the level of academic support and the level of their programme “fantastic”, while around 50% answered “quite good” to these two questions; that 77% gave a positive response is an outcome we can be pleased with. There is still room for improvement and the dissemination of our findings will be shared with our academic advisors to further assist them in providing the best possible support they can.

Career opportunities and permanent residency in New Zealand were the two main reasons students chose to study here. After graduating, over 29% of the student respondents returned to their home country. Of that 29%, 26% looked for work not necessarily related to their qualification, 47% looked for work directly related to their qualification and 11% continued with higher education. What of the remainder who stayed in New Zealand? Those seeking permanent residency numbered almost 49%, while other reasons to stay included marriage, living with their families and applying for working visas in fairly equal measures.

Our findings were of interest to our own institution and ourselves as researchers working in this field; while our survey only included graduates of our own institute, many of the topics covered were not context-specific, so that there is good cause to believe they will be pertinent to others as well. Comparison of experiences by Learning Advisors who work extensively with international services teams would be mutually beneficial and feedback welcomed.

Content and career opportunity

Among the most significant and perhaps surprising findings of the study was the incidence of graduates who are not using the subject content which they studied within their study programme. What does this indicate? Of particular importance in these findings is the necessity for our International Department to ensure agents are thoroughly versed in the content of the study programmes to which they are steering students. While most students felt they had “some” understanding about the programme they were about to engage in, fewer than 9% reported being very well informed.

Over 15% of our graduate students reported that they are not using any content they learned during their formal study, with another 18% only occasionally using this new knowledge in their current workplace. Does this mean they are dissatisfied with the course and would not recommend it to others? Perhaps they will engage in further study? Or, could it mean that they will take longer to reach their ultimate career goal? The result raises the question that perhaps this outcome could be avoided by closer screening of the desired outcomes of the student before commencing their study, that students be directed to a course of study based on their desired employment pathway. There is considerable concern therefore, that these students may not have been on the most appropriate course for their preferred destination.

Of concern is the statistic that one third of the students who responded, revealed that they would not study the same course again; this indicates that the subjects did not provide the students with the outcome they had expected.

Our findings showed that 65% are using content learned within their course and 73% are using skills from their course in their work role. This is a pleasing result and suggestions from the students themselves that other subjects could be included within the courses, would likely see an increase in these percentages if acted upon.

Residency

Expecting to see that international students were engaging in study in New Zealand with a view to gaining residency, we were surprised to find that this was not as strongly indicated as we had anticipated. This was something of a departure from the findings of an earlier study within our current student population at the time: that temporary residence as a student is only ever seen by many as a transitional stage, and in fact a large proportion of New Zealand’s international students are prospective migrants (Fraser & Simpson, 2012).

Overall the information gathered from both the survey and the one-on-one interviews indicated a positive response to students’ study experience – the general cultural and institutional immersion, the academic outcome and the level of information and support available, both preceding and during the study.

Discussion

The purpose of the research project was to provide our organisation – management, marketing and international team – as well as our learning and teaching practitioners, with some understanding of how closely international students’ first destinations after completing their study are aligned with their expectations on entry. The two highest ranked reasons our participants gave for studying with us were to create career opportunities and to pursue permanent residence in New Zealand. Our results indicate that almost half of our graduates have been successful in finding employment related to their qualification, either here or overseas, and over half have stayed on in New Zealand – as permanent residents, on student or work visas, and/or getting married.

There is certainly enough information for our International and Marketing teams to be able to share some very positive and promising student outcomes with agents and prospective students. Several case-study narratives have been generated, and we now have a larger bank of success stories to draw on for promotional purposes.

The results reported here will also allow us to focus more closely on our own delivery and support services. With over a third of our students enrolling as a result of personal referrals, it is vitally important that every one of our international graduates is a potential ambassador for our institution. We need to focus on providing “fantastic” service to all our international students – by the international team, teaching staff and academic support services, each of whom have direct and regular contact with the students.

Student comments included a number of areas in which they felt we could improve: more practical work incorporated in programmes and opportunities for work experience/internships; extended academic pathways; better access to English language specialists and support; and a closer scrutiny over the clarity of delivery from second-language tutors. Of concern is the significant percentage who reported they found the academic support and level of their programme “quite good”. Our objective must be to provide a better service so that students will be motivated to respond with “fantastic”. One reason for the less enthusiastic responses could simply be that students are not fully utilising and aware of the academic support available from our Learning Advisors and ESOL department.

While most students are “mostly satisfied”, there is still the issue that over a third of our international graduates would not study the same programme again – and that means they may not be recommending it to others. To ensure a better outcome here should be a relatively minor adjustment by supporting students to select a different level, or different majors, or even a different field. This must be addressed by continued revisiting of our pre-enrolment information and the quality of advice offered by our first-point-of-contact staff, and our overseas agents. Ensuring that agents are thoroughly informed about course content is imperative. Misinterpretation of course content could even be as simple as the interpretation of the name of that

course. Having the opportunity to speak face to face with domestic students gives us the opportunity to closely align their proposed course of study with their desired destination. Therefore, having the ability to speak to international students before their course starts, might lessen the percentage of dissatisfied students whose preferred outcome is not met because of dissatisfaction with course content.

This raises the issue of ensuring prior academic qualifications meeting entry requirements. Domestic students' qualifications are a known quantity – we know what level the student is at because we understand the New Zealand educational qualifications, beginning with National Certificate of Educational Achievement. Some international students have gained certificates, diplomas and even degrees in their home countries and a closer translation of these results could indicate whether they are meeting new material, revising prior learning or taking an entirely new course of study and at a new level. This information directly affects how that student might function in our educational system and how much support they might need, vital information for staffing requirements.

Some students, albeit a minority, feel disaffected and disempowered as a result of their lack of opportunities. There is a good case that our moral responsibility to our students should continue beyond graduation, with students able to tap into career guidance and mentoring, electronically or face-to-face, if needed. An efficient alumni organisation would go some way to fostering this.

A final point is that this research has yielded some useful, directional information about a population group, which is a key focus for organisational strategy relating to growth and development. Yet this has come from 15% of the total sample pool. Graduates, especially international graduates, are highly mobile and likely to change location and role frequently – making it increasingly difficult to contact them. We need a better system for gathering information about post-study destinations and outcomes, and for developing a web presence where our international student alumni can stay in touch with us. We cannot deliver what students want unless we ask them, and we cannot ask them if we cannot find them! Further to this, if we were able to contact a larger portion of our international graduates, learning more about their experiences with regard to pastoral care, the supplementary language assistance and targeted academic support they received would most certainly provide our organisation with a sound basis with which to fine tune our services.

Implications for management/marketing/international/teachers/Learning Advisor:

- It is clear that our institution needs to maintain stronger links with our graduates. We need an International Student Alumni association, with a web-based presence and a range of facilities for our international graduates to share personal and professional information including contact details, to keep in touch with us and each other, and to keep up-to-date with institutional news and initiatives that may affect them.

- Further research into other mitigating factors that directly affect the choices students make after graduation, would be an obvious path to follow. Some of these factors might include the differences in the educational environment of the New Zealand classroom and that of the student's home country. While this survey does not directly address cultural learning styles, the perception of the international student as an "outsider" and homesickness are all areas which need to be examined in a student's success and enjoyment (Shaw, 2009).

Further desirable outcomes:

- That BoPP's International Team develop a version of this survey to follow up all graduates upon course completion and a year after completing their study with us. We will continue to build a profile of students' career trajectories.
- That agents are kept fully informed of course content changes, term dates, study requirements, prospective student numbers on offered programmes and are given graduate profiles indicating employment options upon graduation.
- That a course overview and face-to-face meeting with a tutor/s be provided to international students on arrival ensuring they are clear on the content of the programme they have enrolled in. At this point, the option to change courses may still be available. If not, extension within that course may be offered, or the opportunity to engage in community activities or with work experience in their chosen field, may be facilitated by the BoPP.
- That academic support and the international team provide specialist ESOL sessions as required.
- That all groups of staff in contact with international students constantly review communication and processes so that international students feel that they receive "fantastic" service throughout their study.
- That BoPP might consider developing a graduate mentoring initiative to address some of the findings raised in this article, where students can enrol with someone who knows them from their study (a School tutor, Programme Coordinator or Group Leader) and be able to ask for feedback with career decisions or direction.
- That academic pathways are clear from the beginning of study and that pathways of further study are made clear.

Conclusion

Many institutions collect their own data about graduating students and what they plan to do upon leaving, including whether they are employed, plan to attend graduate programmes, are still seeking employment or have other plans. Such information can: inform marketing initiatives and may provide statistics which can be published to agents and prospective students of evidence of the value of studying with the organisation; assist with International planning and resource allocation into particular markets; and highlight learning and teaching issues regarding specific needs in

programme content or soft skill development. However, this type of research has not been previously undertaken by our organisation.

Early indications are that the exercise will be extremely valuable, and the data gathered offers some interesting insights. First, it looks as if we may be able to confirm national trends within our own student body, such as the well-recognised phenomena of international graduates transitioning to work and/or permanent residence in New Zealand. Second, it would appear that many students have clear mid and long term objectives when they apply to study with us, but may not always be clear about how the course they enrol in will assist them to achieve this, or how the services we provide can assist them to a successful outcome. We will need to change our practices, particularly around communication – before, during and after the study experience. We look forward to the opportunity to discuss our progress, and that of colleagues in similarly placed institutes, in future ATLAANZ conferences, or to correspond with interested colleagues who read these Proceedings.

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