

International Students: Would a second chance have changed their choices?

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Abstract

Being a mentor to International Students in the Faculty of Business and Computing at a polytechnic in New Zealand, the author has experienced the trials and tribulations of International Students first hand. They begin fresh faced with many expectations, but very soon find that things are not as easy as expected. Some graduates have indicated that they have found it nearly impossible to find jobs and that they are not really well equipped to find good jobs. The main reason mentioned was poor English, even after several years spent in an English-speaking environment. The main regrets were choosing not to live with English-speaking families or flatmates and not having made more of an effort to socialise with local students during their years of study. The proposed research intends to find out the variety of social and academic choices that are made by International Students in business and computing, together with their supporting reasons.

The proposed research also intends to find out if these students would make the same choices given a second chance and what could have helped them make better choices. In-depth interviews will be conducted with current and graduate International Students with final numbers yet to be determined.

This paper will focus on choices made by students, the reasons for these choices and what could have helped them make better choices.

Keywords

International Students, choices made, reasons for choices, second chances

Background

I am a full time lecturer in Accounting at the Eastern Institute of Technology in New Zealand and for the past five years one of my roles has been to act as mentor to the International Students in the Faculty of Business and Computing. As mentor I therefore share with them their trials and tribulations along the way.

My role as mentor to International Students includes the following:

- Meeting with students at the start of a semester to provide them with information
- Serving as a bridge between the lecturers and students
- Reminding lecturers of ways to help students
- Contacting students if they don't attend classes
- Helping students with any academic issues

Motivation for this paper

As I constantly encounter and observe the struggles of the students first hand, I have been asking myself repeatedly whether it is really worth the money and the effort for these students to study in a country other than their own. I have also been wondering whether the students have any regrets. It takes so much effort for them to cope with the English language, the terminology of the subjects, assignments, and then of course there is also the difficulty in integrating with the locals. This prompted me to try and find out why they made their choices and whether they would have made the same choices if given a second chance.

For some time now I have wanted to put in place a special orientation for the new International Students in our faculty and I decided to use this opportunity to find out what information could be helpful before starting a new semester.

Methodology

Twenty-four participants were interviewed and the interviews were audio taped. The participants were a mixture of currently enrolled students who had already been in New Zealand for at least one year as well as graduate students. Eleven of the participants were graduates and some of the graduates already had positions related to their qualifications while others had part-time jobs and were still searching for a "proper" job.

I did not want to use first year students as I felt that these students might still be in the throes of adapting to life in New Zealand and might still feel as if they wanted to go home as soon as possible, whereas students having been here for more than a year would already have settled a bit. The students would also know me well after a year and should feel comfortable being interviewed by me.

Each participant had a 20-30 minute interview where a number of questions regarding their choices were posed to them. I decided to concentrate on three specific areas, namely country, study programme and living arrangements before asking the question that I really wanted answered; was it worth the money and effort to study in a country other than their own? They were then also asked to supply any information that, in their opinion, could be helpful for new students if a special orientation for International Students was put in place.

The New Zealand Ministry of Education had commissioned a survey to provide information to assist with developing policies and best practices relating to international students studying in New Zealand and the final results were reported in June 2004. The survey included students from secondary and composite schools as well as tertiary institutions (Ward & Masgoret, 2004). It was very useful to be able to compare some of my findings to the findings of the survey.

Findings

The findings are grouped as follows:

- Choices regarding the country
- Choices regarding the study programme
- Choices regarding living arrangements
- Was it worth the money and effort?
- Information that could be helpful as part of an orientation

Choices regarding the country

The participants were asked why New Zealand, and not any other country, was chosen and then they were asked whether they would still choose New Zealand if given a second chance. The following tables show the reasons (some had more than one reason) given for choosing New Zealand and whether New Zealand would still be their choice if given a second chance:

Table 1. Reasons for choosing New Zealand

Parents' choice	Cheaper option	Life style /safe	Other
13/24	13/24	11/24	4/22

One of the participants said, 'The first choice, I think, is New Zealand prime minister is a female and this country should be very open minded!'

Although most students said that New Zealand was the parents' choice, only one participant indicated unhappiness at the time the choice was made by the parents.

The reasons supplied by the participants were consistent with the findings of the national survey reporting on New Zealand as study destination, although the survey found "English-speaking environment" as the most selected reason (Ward & Masgoret, 2004, p.7-8).

Table 2. If given a second chance

Would choose New Zealand	Would not choose New Zealand	Unsure
20/24	3/24	1/24

When the participants were asked whether they would choose New Zealand again if given a second chance, those participants who said yes were very positive using words such as 'definitely', 'yes, of course' and 'for sure'. The reasons given for not choosing New Zealand had to do with the perception that there are fewer job opportunities in New Zealand.

Although more than half the participants indicated that it had been the parents choice for them to come to New Zealand, most of these students would still have chosen New Zealand if given a second chance regardless of the fact that they initially just went along with it. Even the participant who had been unhappy about the parents' choice said New Zealand would still be chosen if given a second chance.

Choices regarding the study programme

The following tables show the reasons (some had more than one reason) given for choosing the study programme and whether the same study programme would still be their choice if given a second chance:

Table 3. Reasons for choosing a specific study programme

Interest in the programme	Useful in finding a job	Parents' decision	Easier option
16/24	4/24	2/24	2/24

Table 4. If given a second chance

Would choose the same programme	Would not choose the same programme	Unsure
17/24	5/24	2/24

Overall the participants were very happy with their choice of study programme, even if the choice had been made by their parents. All the participants who said they would not choose the same programme or were unsure, had no regrets about their initial choice, which was a nice surprise to me.

I compared these results to the national survey reporting on evaluation of study programmes and they had reported evaluations to be predominantly in the average to good range (Ward & Masgoret, 2004, p. 8), which indicated a parallel with my findings.

Choices regarding living arrangements

At our graduation this year, two graduates told me that they had regrets about not living with English-speaking people as they felt that their English skills were letting them down in finding a job, even after three or more years in New Zealand. Both told me that they thought it had to do with them not living with English-speaking people.

This prompted me to include questions whereby the participants were asked whether they currently live with English-speaking people and how they feel about living with English-speaking people. I also asked them how much their English has improved and which factor played the biggest role in improving their English. The answers weren't as straight-forward as with the previous two areas and I could sense that most students were a bit out of their comfort zone.

The following table shows the current living arrangements of the participants:

Table 5. Living arrangements

	Speaking English at home	Speaking own language at home
Currently	13/24	11/24

An interesting finding was that most of the students speaking English at home live with friends or flat mates that are from countries other than New Zealand, which means that everyone at home has English as second language.

When I asked the participants which factor played the biggest role in improving their English skills most (23/24) participants said that it had not been their spending time in class, but rather them communicating with English speaking homestay families or English speaking friends or working in an English environment. They instinctively knew that by simply being in a study programme where only English is used does not necessarily mean that their English-language skills would improve, unless they participated actively.

All the participants felt that their English had improved much since coming to New Zealand, but most of them realised that it had not improved as much as it could have, because they did not use their opportunities well enough in speaking English. This was the first time that I sensed some regrets from the students.

One of the students said, 'If you come to New Zealand and just study in your room, I think you can do that in your own country.'

When I asked the participants what they would recommend to someone from their home country wanting to study in New Zealand and needing some tips on living arrangements all the students said that they would recommend that a new student initially live with English speaking people and most recommended a home stay for at least the first year, although they did mention that a homestay would be more expensive. The findings of the national survey reporting on living arrangements found that students in homestay arrangements were significantly more satisfied than those in rental accommodation (Ward & Masgoret, 2004, p. 9). This leads me to believe that this would also be a reason why the participants I interviewed recommended a homestay, as they probably had a good experience themselves. Another interesting fact that I found in the survey was that one of the factors linked to life satisfaction was less contact with compatriots (Ward & Masgoret, 2004, p. 10), which again ties in with the recommendations given by the participants.

Was it worth the money and effort?

To me this question was the most important one and the response was an eye opener. Only one student was a bit hesitant, but all the other students, without hesitation, responded in a very positive manner by saying that it was totally worth the money and effort. The participants used words such as 'definitely', 'absolutely', 'yes, even though I have a child back home'.

Two of the graduates who are currently working said that they might have responded differently if they had not found a job in New Zealand, but two other graduates that had not yet been able to find a job said that it was still worth the money and effort. I am therefore not convinced that the working graduates would have responded differently if they did not have jobs.

All the participants were then very forthcoming in supplying reasons (some had more than one reason) why it has been worthwhile and the following table shows the main reasons provided:

Table 6. Reasons why it was worth the money and effort

Became independent / make own decisions	Gained confidence	New experiences / developed new skills
16/24	12/24	11/24

A graduate, who had already worked in his home country before coming to New Zealand, said that he never felt as independent in his home country as he does in New Zealand, because the parents always played such a big part in all decision making.

One of the students said that in China the one-child policy leads to the child being nurtured and protected so much that it could cause the child to never really learn how to become independent, whereas in New Zealand the student is away from the parents and forced to become independent.

Information that could be helpful as part of an orientation

In our faculty all students have an orientation session at the start of a semester, but usually very few International Students attend these sessions. I asked the participants which information could be helpful as part of an orientation for Business and Computing International students at the start of a semester. When I asked the participants whether they had known how to do their very first assignment, their responses were actually quite funny as they all very vehemently said "NO, not at all!" They had no idea, whatsoever, how to do an assignment. Some students also mentioned that they had no idea what the courses meant and had blindly picked some courses. The following is a list of ideas that the participants felt needed to be discussed with new students:

- The benefits of living with English speaking people as long as possible and making sure you communicate with them
- In New Zealand no one forces you to study, as opposed to back home, and therefore new students need self discipline and need to know how to organise themselves and manage their time
- In New Zealand the teacher tells you little and the rest you have to find out yourself
- In New Zealand your own ideas are important
- Students should not expect A grades and need not be embarrassed about getting a C grade as a C grade does not mean that you are dumb or not as good as the Kiwi students
- If you do not talk to the local students, you will not find out how friendly they are
- Getting a part-time job is helpful for improving English speaking
- The importance of assignments and what lecturers expect from an assignment
- Referencing
- How to go about choosing the best papers
- Group work and the importance of being in a group with local students
- Managing money

Conclusion

Robbie Williams sings "No regrets, they don't work. No regrets, they only hurt".

For me this was a personal journey and an inspiring one as my questions had been answered. Most of the students were happy with their choice of New Zealand and with their choice of study programme and would make the same choices if given a second chance. The only area where I found a hint of regret was that they did not make more of an effort in speaking English from the start and should perhaps have chosen to live for a longer period of time with English-speaking people.

The outcome of the interviews has been a pleasant surprise and has meant a lot to me as mentor to our International Students. It was heart warming to find out that all the students, with no exceptions, had no regrets about studying in a country other than their own, that it was absolutely worth the money and effort and that it has been an invaluable growth experience for them in becoming independent and being able to make their own decisions.

From now on, when working with the students and sharing their pain, I will be able to smile inwardly and know that in future they will come to realise the value of it all.

References

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