

It's too easy! Studying at NZ universities, the perception versus reality. A pilot study.

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Abstract

US study abroad and exchange students arrive at NZ universities and within weeks the word many send back home is that NZ classes are so much easier than those back home. There are no roll calls, and no weekly quizzes or minor assessment items. For study abroad advisors at US universities seeking academically rigorous options for their students, these comments can work against New Zealand as a suitable study abroad destination for their students.

I decided to look more closely at the factors that create this impression of easy classes. If classes are easier in New Zealand then we would expect students' GPAs (Grade Point Average) to increase. By looking at GPAs of students pre-arrival and post-departure, we found that in fact the opposite was more likely to happen.

So what is happening? If classes are easier, why is there a tendency for grades to drop? Are classes more difficult and students are misjudging how difficult they are because of different teaching and assessment styles? Or are students not getting good grades because they are having so much fun travelling and socialising outside class time? Or are students misinterpreting the different teaching and learning styles as easier and not realising until too late how to maximise on the self-directed learning required by most NZ universities? Or are students just graded more harshly at NZ universities?

Finally I look at what we as international educators can do to better prepare all our international students in the hope of closing the gap between perception and reality and creating a semester where academic challenges are more likely to be met.

This paper looks only at general trends rather than detailed analysis and highlights the necessity for further research.

Key Words

Study abroad, learning styles, academic performance

Introduction

Most New Zealand (and Australian) tertiary institutions clamor for US study abroad students. They are seen as a welcome addition to the institution. They bring in good money. In most cases it seems like easy money. Faculty tell us their US students are a breath of fresh air in the classroom. They are never afraid to speak up and create discussion amongst their more retiring and reticent NZ classmates. There is the benefit that they keep small humanities departments alive wanting to learn about NZ history, politics and indigenous and Pacific cultures rather than heading off to Accounting 101.

The staff in the university international offices also tell us their US students are no burden. On the whole with the high GPA requirement and English as their mother tongue, they are seldom in need of emotional or academic support and encouragement. Unlike large groups of non-English speaking students, they warrant little concern and this is reflected in the small amount of research done on US study abroad students in New Zealand and Australia despite their ever increasing numbers.

The students are also happy with the arrangement. Soon after classes begin, they are telling us how wonderful it is to have so few assessment items, no roll calls, and no one checking up on their progress. It all seems so easy! Yet those of us who see the transcripts know that it is more likely for students to get lower grades while they are in NZ than at their home schools.

This was the basis for this small study which broke down into four key objectives:

Key Objectives

- 1. To verify if in fact US study abroad students do believe that studying in NZ is easier than studying in the US.*
- 2. To investigate whether the GPA of US students goes up or down while they are in NZ and to compare the results for US study abroad students over four and a half years from February 2005 till July 2009.*
- 3. To explore other factors besides level of difficulty that could impact on a student's GPA.*
- 4. To provide empirical evidence that will help international office staff in NZ and study abroad advisors in the US better advise students on getting the most out of their semester abroad.*

Background reading

It is very difficult to find relevant articles in the area of GPA and what happens to US students' GPAs when studying abroad. Davina Potts (Potts, 2004) found that at her institution, Macquarie University, where the minimum GPA requirement is 2.5, study abroad students of all nationalities achieved consistently 'at least average or above average results when compared with local students' but she did not compare their results with their previous GPA back home. Potts was happy to share this finding with faculty who had been known to criticise US study abroad students for having a 'party' attitude. We were interested to know if party behaviour was a factor in decreasing GPAs here.

Potts also found that study abroad and exchange students tend to study a mix of levels and often study at least one course below their academic level and should therefore be expected to achieve better results than local students. This is also the case with US students at NZ universities. Some choose 100 and 200 level courses because they think they lower level courses will amount to less study time each week but others can only do 100 level courses because they are so new to the subject area e.g., Maori language and culture. Many also comment later in the semester that choosing low level courses is not so much a question of being 'easy' but 'boring', and if students engage less, this could also affect GPA.

Potts (2004) found too that study abroad and exchange students take a lesser course load than Australian and full-degree international students. Potts concluded in the study that overall 92% of US study abroad students have a successful semester at Macquarie but through her findings confirmed that US students arriving with a GPA of less than 2.5 had only a 50% chance of succeeding. In response to this finding, advisors at Macquarie were being more careful about selection and had started placing some restrictions on people coming with a GPA lower than 2.5. I did not give the issue of low GPA entry requirements consideration in this study because the four universities we gathered data from have a minimum requirement of 2.7 or higher. (Auckland 3.0, Victoria 2.7, Canterbury 2.8, and Otago 3.0)

Another study of interest was undertaken in 2001 by Mary Merva (2003). Merva looked at the academic results of 436 students all enrolled in an American university in Europe. She compared the results of those students for whom the GPA for the semester was 'counted in' to their GPA back in the US with the results of the students that only took courses on a pass/fail basis. Merva found that students that knew the grades counted seemed more motivated to study and achieved better academic results. This is of interest as 37% of

our students claim they only need a pass/fail and if Merva's hypothesis is correct, this could be a demotivating factor.

Trooboff, Cressey and Monty (2004) also looked at the effect on grades when students know the GPA counts back home and challenged Merva's theory of study abroad grading as a possible motivation tool for study abroad students. Trooboff et al (2004) felt one of the factors affecting GPA for students abroad is that overseas' institutions grade students' work differently to faculty in the US (p 215). This is relevant to this study because a drop in GPA may be as simple as aligning different grading systems. Their research indicated that top grades are less frequently awarded abroad than in the US. One of the writers had personal experience of students appealing grades because students were awarded a B for something they felt would have received an A back home (p 215) If Trooboff et al's assumption is correct then questions arise around the suggestion of inflating grades when students are studying in NZ universities and how that is monitored by NZ universities and their partner institutions in the US.

Hadis (2005) also mentions the different grading system overseas as a possible cause for a student's GPA to drop. He reports 'the exposure to grading in a higher education system where professors seldom grade exceptional examinations or papers with a mark higher than 70%, will change the priorities of US participants. One possible consequence of this shift of priorities is that a participant's GPA can come down slightly not because they have become worse students after studying abroad, but because they are less obsessed with their grades.' (Hadis, 2005)

Interestingly, although Hadis (2005) does not look at what happens to students' GPA while abroad, he does make an assumption from recent literature that participants in study abroad programs acquire global mindedness, grow intellectually and develop personally. He claims that faculty and study abroad advisors notice that returning students are more curious and interested in academic matters and happier to study for the sheer pleasure of learning rather than just for a higher grade. So despite a decline in GPA a student could still return to the US a better student. This would suggest a need for further research into what happens to a student's GPA not just for the semester abroad but once the student is back at their home school.

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So to sum up, the background reading, while not always directly related, suggests that three factors are likely to impact on students GPA while abroad:

- Whether the students grades in NZ count towards their GPA back home, or if the student only needs pass/fail
- A reluctance from NZ faculty to award high grades despite the student working at the equivalent of an 'A' in the US
- The tendency for students to often choose courses a year below their academic level and a lighter course load, would mean they were often better placed to succeed.

It was also reassuring to know that even though students may have lower GPAs than back home, at Macquarie they still outdid their Australian classmates on average. There also seems to be a general acknowledgement from faculty that studying abroad, despite possibly producing a lower GPA for the semester away, is likely to produce more curious and attentive students on their return to their home schools.

This small research project.

Arcadia University has been bringing students to Auckland, Otago and Victoria universities in NZ from universities all around the US since 2001, and to Canterbury since 2008. After the students finish their exams and results have been gathered by the International Office of each institution, the NZ university sends a transcript for each student to Arcadia University in Pennsylvania, where staff upload the information into the data system and an Arcadia transcript with the same grades is issued and sent to the student's home school. The present data system has been in place since early 2005 and it is that set of data that we accessed to see if a student's GPA had gone up or down after their semester in NZ.

To look at how difficult or easy students perceived their semester to be, we decided to produce a sheet with a list of 23 statements and students were asked to tick or highlight any they felt were relevant to them. We decided rather than to just present courses on level of difficulty, to include statements that would indicate

other behaviours that could be detrimental to academic success e.g., increased social activity, increased alcohol intake, a lack of academic support and homesickness.

Here is the list of 23 statements:

Please tick any of the following statements that ring true for you:

- I am doing only 100 and 200 level courses only
- The courses here are much easier than back home
- Less work is required of students in NZ
- I have taken courses that are more interesting than what I was doing back home
- I am studying harder in NZ than at home
- The grading scale here makes it easier to get higher grades
- Courses are more difficult
- Courses are more boring
- The grading scale used here makes it harder to get good grades
- Exams make up a large part of the final grade and I am not good at exams
- I have not been studying hard
- I have not been doing the suggested reading
- I have been skipping classes more than at home
- I am doing all higher level courses (300 level)
- I only need a pass/fail, so grades don't affect my GPA
- I get less academic support from my tutors/lecturers in NZ
- I am travelling most weekends exploring NZ culture and environment
- I have been more involved in sports/music and other cultural activities
- I am being far more social than I would back home
- I have been drinking alcohol more than I would back home
- My grades are hindered by my lack of background knowledge
- I am homesick, missing family and friends

I have no idea what grade I'll get because:

- I so seldom get feedback from tutors/lecturers

The list was handed to students at their farewell dinners in the last week of lectures and before their exams had begun. This was done for students in both semesters 2009.

Findings

1. *My first objective was to find out if US study abroad students believe that studying in New Zealand universities is easier than at their home schools.*

I had assumed from student chat that this was the case. We therefore looked at the number of students who ticked the following statements:

- The courses here are much easier than back home 34/122 (28%)
- Less work is required of students in NZ 84/122 (69%)
- The grading scale here makes it easier to get higher grades 55/122 (45%)

And assumed that frequency for those statements would be higher than for:

- Courses are more difficult 15/122 (12%)
- The grading scale used here makes it harder to get good grades 26/122 (21%)

So although the majority of students did not tick the statement 'the courses are easier', more than double ticked this statement as opposed to the statement claiming that courses are more difficult. Even more convincing was that almost 70% believe less work is required of students in NZ. This was the most

frequently ticked statement of all 23. This result indicates that overall US study abroad students near the end of their lectures (but before their exams) do think that studying in NZ is easier than at their home school.

2. *My second objective was to look at movement of student GPA after a semester of study abroad in NZ.*

For this we went to data records stored by Arcadia in the US and only included students' results if the data was complete i.e., if we had on record both the GPA pre-arrival and the GPA for their NZ semester. We were only looking for broad trends rather than exact figures. The results are as follows:

2005 Student GPA movement

2005	GPA went up	GPA went down	Zero change
Uni 1	1	3 (60%)	1
Uni 2	2	9 (82%)	
Uni 3	6	6 (50%)	
Total	9 (32%)	18 (64%)	

2006 Student GPA movement

2006	GPA went up	GPA went down	Zero change
Uni 1	4	17 (81%)	
Uni 2	11	11 (50%)	
Uni 3	11	19 (63%)	
Total	26 (35.5%)	47 (64.5%)	

2007 Student GPA movement

2007	GPA went up	GPA went down	Zero change
Uni 1	2	17 (89%)	
Uni 2	10	9 (47%)	
Uni 3	12	30 (71%)	
Total	24 (28%)	56 (65%)	6

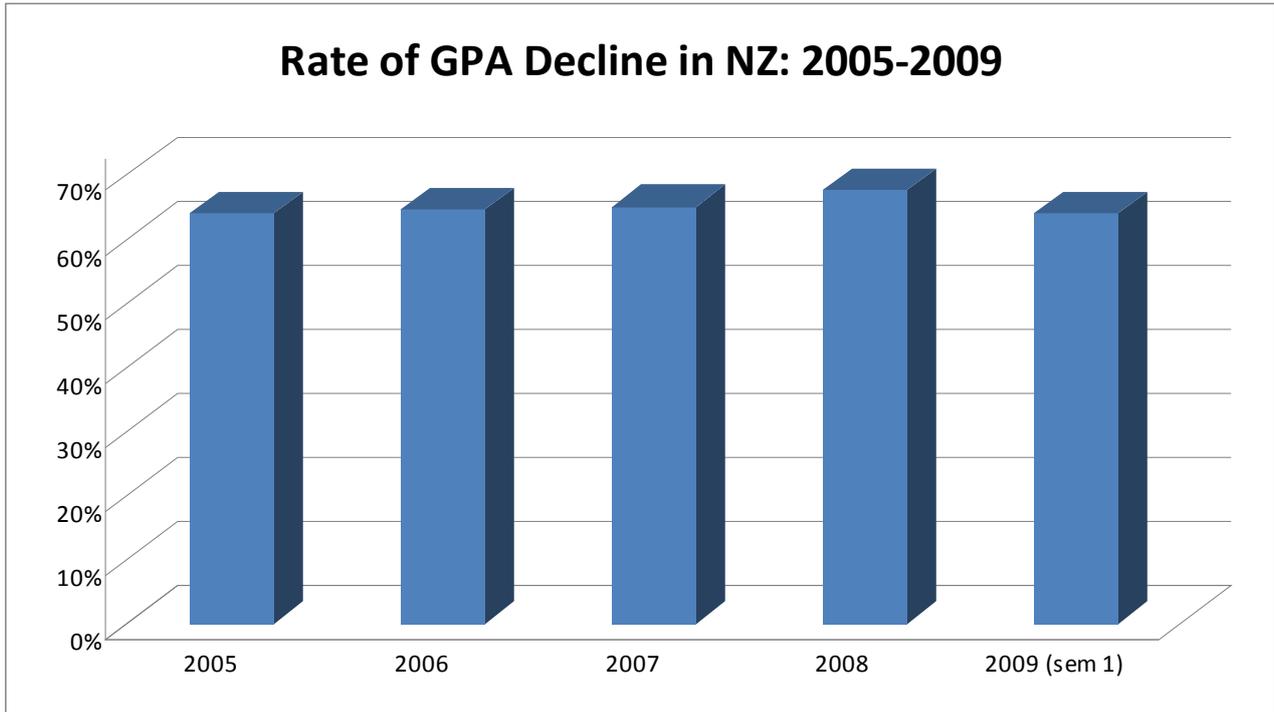
2008 Student GPA movement

2008	GPA went up	GPA went down	Zero change
Uni 1	4	17 (81%)	
Uni 2	14	14 (50%)	
Uni 3	8	27 (75%)	1
Uni 4	2	3 (60%)	
Total	28 (31%)	61 (67.5%)	1 (1.5%)

2009 Student GPA movement

2009 (Sem 1 only)	GPA went up	GPA went down	Zero change
Uni 1	2	13 (87%)	
Uni 2	7	9 (53%)	1
Uni 3	9	18 (66%)	
Uni 4	7	6 (46%)	
Total	25 (35%)	46 (64%)	1 (1%)

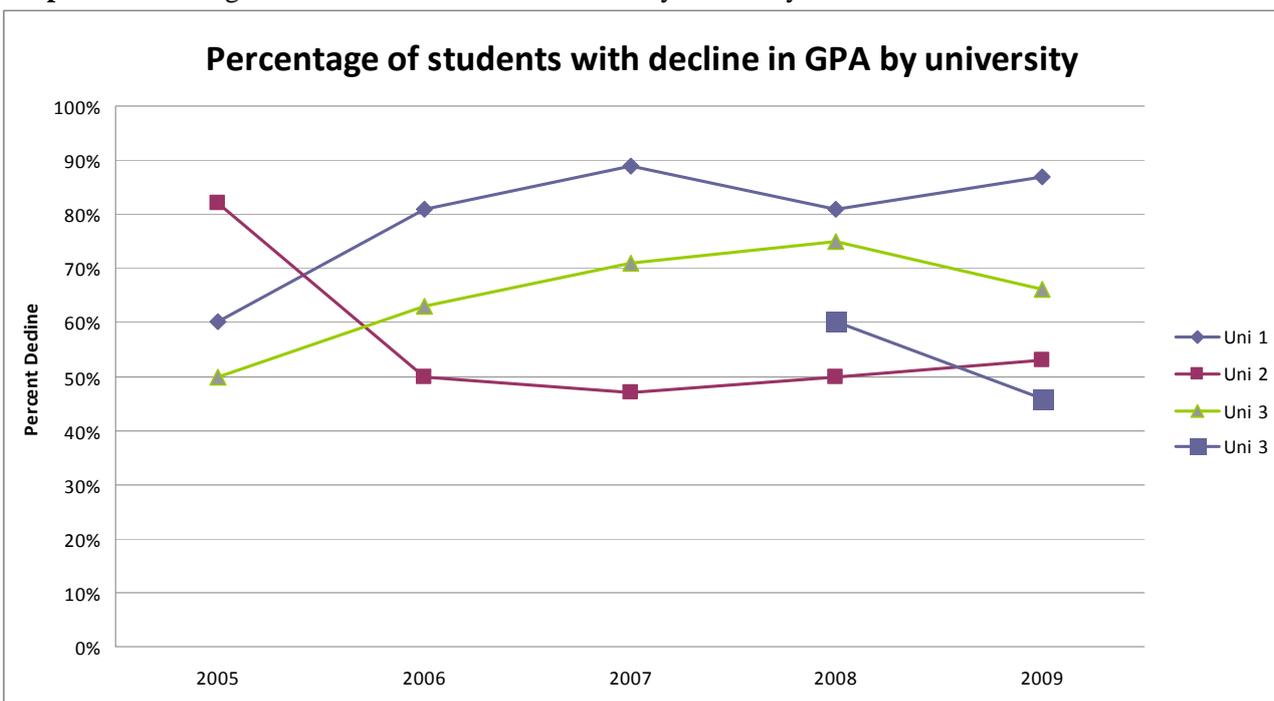
Graph A:



Although the measure is an extremely blunt tool with no investigation into the amount of movement, I was surprised at the consistency across all five years (see Graph A) with the GPAs of approximately two thirds of each cohort declining during their semester abroad. So I can say with confidence that GPAs for US study abroad students are twice as likely to ‘go down’ than ‘go up’ while studying for a semester in NZ.

I also noticed a pattern in the results for each individual university which would indicate that the likelihood of a student’s GPA declining could be increased or decreased depending on which university the student chose to attend.

Graph B: Percentage of students with decline in GPA by university



Year	Uni 1	Uni 2	Uni 3	Uni 4
2005	60%	82%	50%	No students
2006	81%	50%	63%	No students
2007	89%	47%	71%	No students
2008	81%	50%	75%	60%
2009	87%	53%	66%	46%
Average	80%	56%	65%	53%

From Graph B it appears that on average 80% of students' GPA drops at Uni 1, compared with 65% at Uni 3 and closer to 50% at Uni 2. If that drop is very tiny then there is no need for concern but if the drop in GPA is consistently high then this would warrant discussion as to whether grades need to be adjusted for students attending that university. We know that some provider institutions do already make adjustments to student grades for some NZ universities but on what basis and whether it is with the blessing of the NZ university or not needs open discussion and further research.

So why do students differ in academic success at different universities? One possibility is teaching and assessment styles. I put forward the hypothesis here that the universities where students seem to do better have more internal assessment and less weighting on the final exam result and maybe American students respond better to internal assessment because that is what they are more used to. Or maybe more internal assessment alerts students to what level they are really achieving at and so they are working more continuously throughout the semester.

Another possibility is that some universities simply grade harder than others as claimed by Hadis (2005). Unfortunately I cannot make any conclusions from such simplified data but it was interesting to find some trends in the results and speculate as to why.

3. *My third objective was to look at other factors or commonalities in student behaviour that could be causing GPAs to decline despite most students thinking that studying in NZ requires less effort.*

The first thing I did was to rank the statements in order from most to least frequently ticked. 61 students each semester of 2009 completed the questionnaires, 122 in total, and so I recorded the number and converted it to a percentage of respondents who ticked each statement. The results were as follows:

- Less work is required of students in NZ (69%)
- I am travelling most weekends exploring NZ culture and environment (57%)
- I have been skipping classes more than at home (50%)
- I get less academic support from my tutors/lecturers in NZ (50%)
- I am doing only 100 and 200 level courses only (49%)
- I have not been studying hard (46%)
- The grading scale here makes it easier to get higher grades (45%)
- Exams make up a large part of the final grade and I am not good at exams (42%)
- I have not been doing the suggested reading (42%)
- I only need a pass/fail, so grades don't affect my GPA (37%)
- I have been drinking alcohol more than I would back home (36%)
- I have taken courses that are more interesting than what I was doing back home (34%)
- The courses here are much easier than back home (28%)
- I have no idea what grade I'll get because I so seldom get feedback from tutors/lecturers (26%)
- Courses are more boring (25%)
- The grading scale used here makes it harder to get good grades (21%)
- I am being far more social than I would back home (21%)
- My grades are hindered by my lack of background knowledge (20%)
- I have been more involved in sports/music and other cultural activities (17%)
- Courses are more difficult (12%)

- I am studying harder in NZ than at home (9%)
- I am homesick, missing family and friends (9%)
- I am doing all higher level courses (300 level) (7%)

Although not conclusive, these results indicate a trend for students to select lower level courses, decide that less work is required and then skip classes and travel at every opportunity, not do the reading and drink more alcohol than usual. Those behaviours along with a heavy weighting on exams would account for a drop in GPA for many students. The mystery could be more about how one third of students manage to increase their GPA.

The above results did not differentiate between students who improved their GPA and those who did not improve. So I then separated the two groups and looked for any factors impacting on GPA or commonalities in student behaviour for students whose GPAs went up, compared with students whose GPAs went down. We only have the data to do this for the first semester 2009 cohort but the results were interesting.

The most frequently ticked statements for those whose GPAs went up were:

- Less work is required of students in NZ (60%)
- The courses here are much easier than back home (56%)
- The grading scale here makes it easier to get higher grades (56%)
- I am doing only 100 and 200 level courses only (52%)
- I have not been studying hard (52%)
- I have been skipping classes more than at home (48%)
- I am travelling most weekends exploring NZ culture and environment (48%)
- I get less academic support from my tutors/lecturers in NZ (44%)

And yet the most frequently ticked statements for those whose GPAs went down were:

- Less work is required of students in NZ (69%)
- I am travelling most weekends exploring NZ culture and environment (64%)
- Exams make up a large part of the final grade and I am not good at exams (47%)
- I am doing only 100 and 200 level courses only (44%)
- I have taken courses that are more interesting than what I was doing back home (44%)
- I have not been doing the suggested reading (44%)
- I have been drinking alcohol more than I would back home (44%)

Although the research tool is very blunt and simple, by comparing both groups I can build two different pictures where students whose GPA went down are more likely to have no idea where they are academically because they feel they do not get enough feedback from lecturers. They are also more likely to think less work is required and yet they are less successful academically. This would indicate that they underestimate the amount of effort required. They are also more likely to travel in the weekends, and are more likely to choose interesting courses. They find exams are a large part of the final grade and do not tend to do well at exams and are less likely to skip class but more likely to be social and drink alcohol.

Students who improve on their GPA while in NZ are more likely to be doing lower level courses and find their courses a lot easier than back home. They are also three times more likely to find their courses boring. They claim to not study as hard as back home, skip more classes and are just as likely to need to pass/fail rather than have their grades count towards their GPA back home. (This challenges Merva's theory (2003) that students perform better when they know the GPA counts.)

So from this very basic and small set of data what are likely factors that lead to a lower GPA?

- Travelling most weekends exploring NZ culture and environment
- Drinking more alcohol
- Taking courses that have a large exam component if you are someone that does not do well in exams

And what factors are likely to lead to a higher GPA?

- Taking only 100 and 200 level courses (but in doing so the courses are likely to be more boring, and students are likely to skip classes, not do the reading and still do well)
4. *My fourth and final objective is to provide empirical data to help people in International Offices both in NZ and in the US better advise US students.*

I feel the findings here back up the following words of advice to students.

1. Don't underestimate the level of difficulty.

The majority of you will start at your NZ university and there will be no roll calls, no one monitoring your progress, no little assessment items, no one checking you have done all the recommended readings and it will feel so much easier than back home but we know that for 65% of students on average, your GPA will drop this semester. Do not underestimate the level of difficulty. Go to classes, do the readings, go to tutorials.

2. Work hard and play hard but in that order!

Our findings show that students who are most likely to drop in academic performance, are more likely to underestimate the amount of effort required, drink more alcohol and travel every weekend, exploring their new environment. Work hard on your school work during the week before you enjoy the weekends.

3. 100 level courses may be easy but are also likely to be boring.

We know that most US students are third or second year students and they often select 100 level courses hoping to free up more time for travel and exploration but find that the courses are not so much 'easy' as 'boring'. Students need to extend themselves. 200 and 300 level courses are likely to be more stimulating and smaller in class size and definitely more interesting.

Where to from here?

I have only touched on some general trends and am eager that further research be done with a much more detailed questionnaire (with graded rankings) and data analysis. I also realise the importance of looking more closely at the amount of GPA movement for students at each university.

I hope that the findings here will also be a starting point for other discussions:

Firstly where does the perception that studying in NZ requires less effort come from?

Why are some universities likely to bring about more academic success than others? Is it a question of internal assessment versus exams? Or do some institutions grade harder?

How do universities feel about grades from their universities being inflated by study abroad providers? Who monitors this? And what is the rationale for inflating grades? Is this something study abroad providers are open about?

Are there subject areas that students are more likely to get lower grades in? Potts, (2004) states that study abroad students with low GPA at Macquarie were steered away from business and engineering.

How does a likely drop in GPA affect an institution's reputation? Are tertiary institutions proud when students GPAs drop? Is it a reflection that standards are high?

And what happens to study abroad students' GPA when they return? Is Hadis right in his assumption that by experiencing another culture, students become better students, are more curious and enjoy learning for the pleasure of learning?

This is a small pilot study that set out to answer questions but seemed to open up so many more.

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