

“I learnt to live happily”: Self-reflection on success factors for New Zealand Aid Programme scholars

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As international student support staff we encounter a wealth of “data” via email, over the phone and across the consultation table every day. Rarely, however, do we have the time and opportunity to capture and analyse what we see and hear time and again. This qualitative study hopes to not only listen closely to and learn from what students themselves are saying about their experience, but also to provide fellow practitioners with a model for further research that could easily be woven into their own busy workdays.

Among international students, MFAT-funded New Zealand Aid Programme scholars have perhaps the most explicit obligation and opportunity to go forth as “global citizens” on completion of their studies. They are possibly also *the* international students with which university support staff has the most intensive contact throughout the student lifecycle. At Victoria University of Wellington (VUW), a one-hour exit interview is conducted with each departing scholar. This interview gathers students’ reflections on studying and living in NZ, their advice for new students, suggestions for improvements and an indication of their short and long-term plans.

Drawing on two years’ worth of these exit interviews with over 70 MFAT-funded students at VUW, this paper asks, “What is it that scholars themselves say is of greatest value? How do they define „a successful student experience“? And are the success factors they identify those that build a „global citizen“?” From the interviews several common „success factor themes“ are identified: connection and community, study-life balance, expectations, and overcoming challenges. A series of focus groups with 2012 departing students is then conducted on each theme. Key findings suggest how policies and practice can more *naturally support* those elements that students believe are integral to their success.

Key Words

Aid Programme, NZAID, AusAID, exit interview, student experience, values, success factors, student support,