Disillusionment and broken dreams: gaps between policy and reality for international students in New Zealand

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ABSTRACT
Global IT shortages can provide an opportunity for potential and existing IT professionals to take up residence in New Zealand. They seek a comparatively less stressful yet high quality lifestyle for their families. New Zealand has a variety of preferred categories of immigrants; skilled migrant, Investor and Investor Plus, the new Silver Fern system, and Students as New Settlers/Immigrants. However, the New Settlers in IT Project conducted by Graduate Diploma in ICT students at CPIT indicates a gap between the aspirations of some new settlers and their ability to take up these opportunities – especially students as new settlers/immigrants. Further, their reported experiences indicate that these difficulties lie outside their personal control and intended government policy outcomes. Difficulties appear to be embedded in disadvantage arising out of one’s cultural identity being outside of New Zealand’s historically narrow ethnic and demographic mix of language and culture. While the research project itself combined quantitative and qualitative methods of surveys, policy analysis, and in-depth interviews, this paper is limited in scope to reporting the qualitative effects of this positioning. It provides a snapshot of the barriers, dilemmas and mixed policy messages facing some aspiring new settlers in one South Island city of New Zealand in 2010, prior to the earthquakes. The recession and economic downturn appear to exacerbate these effects with disillusioning consequences.

Keywords
Immigration, new settlers, immigration policy, immigration law, international students

1. INTRODUCTION
Given that New Zealand’s shortage of IT professionals is persistent and long standing (Swain, 2004), one powerful mechanism to overcome that shortage and ensure effective economic performance in New Zealand is providing residency to current IT professionals, and overseas graduates willing to upskill their professional qualifications in the IT field. This has been recognised by successive governments, and is reflected in current immigration policy (Brazil et al, 2008) and is borne out by recent statistics (Geoff, 2010). The number of foreign students has increased from the previous years. Education New Zealand figures show 93,500 fee-paying foreign students studied in New Zealand in 2009, compared with 88,570 the previous year (Geoff, 2010).

New and aspiring new settlers are being attracted to New Zealand for several reasons: it has a low population, has a relatively less stressful and less competitive education and economic systems with a relatively high standard of living at a lower cost compared with one’s country of origin, and offers an accessible immigration policy that is less costly to take up than other western countries with more restrictive entry criteria (Geoff, 2010).

However, despite the inclusive nature of current government policy, there is a gap between the intended effects of the policy and the actual effects. International students from China, South Korea and India in particular, with good academic backgrounds and aptitudes to take up IT training in New Zealand tertiary institutions, do not smoothly take up employment in the IT sector. This slippage has both an economic and human cost: the shortages in IT are not alleviated and potential and existing new settlers may suffer hardship and disillusionment (McCarthy and Yoo, 2010). This paper extends these research findings.

2. METHODOLOGY
The overarching research question was to identify the issues arising out of the experiences of international students aspiring to be new settlers as IT professionals. In particular, it sought to identify gaps between stated policy aims and the reported outcomes for these research participants. It sought to tease out the constraints that inhibit a smooth transition between gaining student status as an IT student and fulfilling the aspiration to gain permanent residency as an IT professional.

Participants were interviewed by student interviewers from their own or similar cultural background rather than those from a different culture for ease of communication of sensitive issues such as racism. In-depth structured interviews were conducted within CPIT ethics guidelines. Names and details were changed to provide anonymity and confidentiality was assured.

In-depth interviews were structured to generate qualitative data in the form of individuals’ personal histories, perspectives, and experiences. In particular, participants were asked demographic questions such as age, ethnicity, length of time in New Zealand, and their occupational background in their country of origin. They were asked whether they entered New Zealand alone or with their families.

The interview focused on their aspirations, why New Zealand was selected, and what differences they experienced in New Zealand compared with their country of origin. They were asked whether they were involved in work or study and about their plans after graduation. Finally they were asked about any difficulties they had experienced in work or study, and if they had experienced any examples discrimination in either sphere. Difficulties in gaining employment were explored including length of time in gaining a job, their career plans, and their aspirations to gain permanent residence.
3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Present immigration policies have a two-fold purpose of attracting employees in areas of demand such as IT, and to encourage investment in New Zealand business and enterprise. Immigration policies and laws are administered by Immigration New Zealand which is part of the Ministry of Business, Innovation, & Employment. Thus, apart from the standard student visa, skilled migrants are invited to apply for residence. Principal applicants must be no older than 55 years. In the case of work to residence, this category provides a way to gain residence for people who hold permits granted under work policies – talent accredited employers; talent art, culture and sports (Brazil et al, 2008).

In the Investor category, applicant migrants should be less than 54 years old, have at least four years’ business experience, invest $NZ 2.5 million in New Zealand for at least four years, and have English scores of 5 in IELTS. In the professional investor category, the applicants should be less than 64 years old, invest at least $NZ10 million in New Zealand, and have English scores of 4 in IELTS (Immigration New Zealand, 2010).

Of particular note to ITPs is the new Silver Fern policy, which came into effect on 27 April, 2010. It applies to young and highly skilled people from all over the world, and allows them to enter New Zealand to seek employment in a skilled occupation. Three hundred positions are available every year through an online application system. The applicant should be between twenty and thirty five years of age, reside outside New Zealand until the application process is finished, hold a bachelor degree or higher qualification, meet the English language requirements of 6.5 in IELTS, have at least $NZ 4,200 funds to meet the living costs, and have not previously held a Silver Fern visa. When issued, the Silver Fern Job Search visa is valid for six months. Once the applicants arrive in New Zealand, they applicant will usually be granted a work permit which is valid for nine months (Immigration New Zealand, 2010).

The number of students coming to New Zealand has significantly increased in the past decade. For example, while the traditional flow of students from China declined from 19,664 in 2001/2002 to 3,892 in 2009/2010, the number of visas awarded to students from India has risen from 1,317 in 2001/2002 to 4,391 in 2009/2010 (Education New Zealand, 2010). Those awarded to students from Saudi Arabia rose from 36 in 2001/2002 to 7,014 in 2009/2010 (Baker, 2010). Jonathan Coleman, New Zealand Minister of Immigration, reported international students contribute $NZ2.1Billion to the New Zealand economy (Coleman, 2009), with Saudi students representing $NZ300 million (Teshnar, 2009).

Thus, export education makes a considerable contribution to the New Zealand economy. Foreign exchange, and jobs continue to rise and continue to have great potential for growth (Coleman, 2009). Governments recognize that international students, who had studied in New Zealand, are potential quality migrants as they have qualifications that are recognised by New Zealand employers and have already partly settled here (Swain, 2004).

What motivates international students and graduates to consider applying for residency? Migration is influenced by “push and pull” factors. Push factors force a person to move. These include drought, famine, lack of jobs, over population and civil war. Pull factors encourage a person to move, such as a chance for a better job, better education, and a better standard of living (Teshnar, 2009). Being an international student is expensive and takes considerable time and effort, so it is unlikely to be an easy decision for most students to make.

Harassment and discrimination are handled in different ways in different countries. It is suggested that education should be provided for international students to inform them of their rights and responsibilities as outlined by laws and university policies. In addition, international students may not have a clear understanding of “race” as defined by law or of what constitutes harassment, and how to seek assistance (Sutton, 2002).

Some New Zealand based research has been conducted among Pacific Island students at Auckland University, sponsored by the Ministry of Education. The Pacific Island Students Academic Achievement Collective (1993) noted Pacific Island students achieved low marks in their study and suggested ways in which lecturers could understand their background to improve achievement. Language is one of biggest issues for international students. It can cause discrimination and is also be an obstacle to fully understanding their studies.

To counter this, there is a Code of Practice for the Pastoral Care of International Students. All educational institutions must honour this to have international students in their institutions. The code provides a framework for service delivery to international students from educational providers and their agents.. It sets out the minimum standards of advice and care that is expected from educational providers. The code applies to pastoral care and provision of information, and does not yet cover academic standards (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2003). Thus, international students are legally protected by tertiary providers and they have a right to ask for help from them.

4. STUDENT NARRATIVES

Jessica’s Story

Jessica was from South Korea and was born in 1970. She has a degree and came to New Zealand with her family in May, 2008. She ran a shop in South Korea and enjoyed living there. But she her priority is creating better opportunities for her three children. Jessica wanted to enable them study overseas because South Korea was very competitive and she didn’t want them to study under stress. The main reasons that she chose New Zealand was that she believed that it has very beautiful natural scenery and that her children could learn English without difficulty.

Jessica was hired to work in a sweet shop but the wage was not sufficient for a five member family to live on. So she took a second job as a cleaner with her husband in the morning, and in the afternoon still worked in the shop which her husband managed. She wanted to live in New Zealand because she could aspire to earn enough money to enjoy her life. She believed that she could apply for residence soon. If her family got residence, she would live in New Zealand forever.

Jessica never felt any discrimination here, but her children had experienced some discrimination from kiwi children. She believed their parents should educate their children to have positive attitudes towards new settlers from South Korea in their homes. She is eager to have a residence in New Zealand. But she was worried about getting a residence because she believed both she and her husband were not fluent enough in English.

Kim’s Story

Kim is a South Korean and was born in 1965. He has a bachelor degree. He came to New Zealand in September 2009 with his
family. He is living here with his wife and two children. He used to work for a big company in the real estate industry. The reason he chose New Zealand was because the exchange rate was lower than any other English speaking country and New Zealand had “very good natural scenery”. He also didn’t want his eight year old daughter and five year old son to live in the highly competitive environment in South Korea. Kim needed to be able to better manage his own workload because in South Korea he had worked all the time and never thought of his health. Before he came to New Zealand, he thought that his family would stay one or two years for his children’s education and his health.

Kim discovered that if he studied and got a job in New Zealand, he could have a chance to get residency. In the first six months he has been in New Zealand, he began to study a Graduate Diploma in Information Technology. He believed that his children have adjusted to their New Zealand school very well. His children were ranked in the middle of their classes when they first came to study, but they have really enjoyed their education here in New Zealand. Kim was of the belief that it was because primary or intermediate schools in New Zealand do not require much from students. His children are proficient at maths and have taught maths to their friends. They have made many friends since they came to New Zealand.

Kim wanted to get a job after studying in New Zealand. He was to graduate from his IT course in four months, but was told that it was very hard to get a job in New Zealand. If he had residency after graduating, he could start a business in New Zealand. But it was very hard to get residency. So Kim did not know what to do after studying. He found that he could apply for a business investment visa which required 10 million NZD, but he didn’t have such money to invest.

“If I had already such money back in Korea, then there is no reason for me to come to New Zealand and live in the first place. Such immigration policy does not make sense to me. Why would a millionaire come to a country where a first language is different?”

Kim felt that if New Zealand wanted immigrants, their standard should be changed to a reasonable one. The government should grant people who can benefit New Zealand a residency instead of asking for such high investment amounts from potential immigrants.

He wanted to start a business because he had some money in South Korea. He thought that the investment should be around $100,000 to 200,000. He has been told that he would have to go back to South Korea next year if he cannot get a job or start a business.

Harpreet’s Story

Harpreet is a 26 year old student at CPIT, who arrived in July 2009. When he came, Harpreet thought that he would have the very best experience of his life. But on his very first day he had difficulty with finding a place to live as well problems finding a job to cover his living expenses. He could not get a part-time job at all for first six months.

He was having a mixed kind of experience in Christchurch. After almost a year in Christchurch he thought he should have chosen some another country. Although it is a cheap country and the fees and living expenses are less expensive here compared to other countries, New Zealand was not his first choice.. His first preference was Australia but because of the perception of racial discrimination towards Indian students at that time, he preferred to come to New Zealand. He saw this as the main reason for the growing trend of Indians coming to New Zealand instead of Australia.

“Education in New Zealand is much better than India. Studies here are more focused on practical skills rather than theoretical as it is in India. I like the way of self-learning in New Zealand and I like the people here at CPIT”.

Harpreet faced many difficulties as well as finding a place to live and a place to work. He has experienced racism here a few times as he is Sikh and he used to wear a turban on his head.

“One day some drunken people on the road threw a bottle at my head. Most employers advised me to take off my turban if I wanted to get a job. It was a difficult situation for me... Employers seem to prefer local people rather than people from other nationalities.”

Harpreet had a lot of dreams when he first arrived here. He wanted to get a good job to earn a high salary to support his family back in India. But nothing like that has happened.. Harpreet was still struggling and still waiting for his expectations to be fulfilled. He believed that some agents in India were misleading the students in several ways. He was told by his agent that Christchurch was a place where he could get the job easily, and that it was easy to get permanent residency here within two years. But his experience was different. He will now recommend to his friends to stay where they are. But if they still planned to come to New Zealand, Harpreet believes that his friends should do a lot more research before coming.

Michelle’s Story

Michelle is from South Korea and was born in 1970. She has a bachelor degree. She came to New Zealand in August, 2008 with her family. She has been living with her husband and child. She used to work in a large scale company and then worked as an English lecturer in South Korea. The reason Michelle chose New Zealand was that she wanted her child to learn English well and live in a less competitive society. Michelle also thought that she could get residency in New Zealand more easily than other countries.

“In order to settle down in another country, it is very important to have residency. Without having residency, people who live here can only be visitors.”

Michelle believed that New Zealand has very good education system and good natural scenery where children can grow up well. She also checked if New Zealand also had some types of investment visas for potential immigrants. Michelle believed that what she found was that in actual fact New Zealand did not want immigrants.

“The high investment amount set by the New Zealand government is really telling the potential immigrants the truth.”

Michelle thought that the investment amount should be around $100,000 to 300,000 NZD. She found that around $100,000 would be enough for starting up a business in New Zealand. She used to work at an import company and she had some knowledge of trading. She wanted to export some products made in New Zealand to South Korea and other countries. But she found out that it was not a good idea to start a business without residency even if she had an open work permit. Without residency, her life
in New Zealand would be very unstable. She insisted that the investment visa system which looked unreal should be changed.

**Ana’s Story**

Ana is from South Korea and was born in 1965. She has a bachelor degree. She came to New Zealand in December, 2009 with her family. She has been living with her husband and child in New Zealand. She used to work at a medium-sized company. She chose New Zealand because she thought that she could get residency more easily than other countries such as Canada and Australia. But she is beginning to think that she should have gone to Canada or Australia because it looks as if it is not possible to get residency in New Zealand after all.

Because Ana couldn’t get residency, she has been studying in New Zealand. Now her major is no longer on the skill shortage list and she couldn’t decide what to do next because her graduation didn’t help her to get residency. It was very expensive to check this matter out with lawyers in New Zealand. Ana is confused because she planned to settle down using studying in New Zealand but she believed that the immigration policy suddenly changed. She was really worried about her future because she believed she had spent money while gaining nothing.

**Rajiv’s Story**

Rajiv is 23 years of age and recently graduated in Christchurch. He came to New Zealand last year in February. His experience in New Zealand is also mixed, but it is a more positive experience in terms of finding and getting a job. He stayed with his relatives in Christchurch when he first arrived and they helped him find a job.

Rajiv believes he has been very fortunate in that he has received help from everybody when he was in trouble and needed it. He likes New Zealand because of beautiful scenery, the peaceful country, and the varied culture so that everybody can fit in. His overall experience to date in New Zealand is very good. He has never faced any racism here. He is now on his open job search visa and still looking for a job in the field in which he completed his studies. New Zealand is his first choice as he has relatives here. He has recommended his friends and relatives come to New Zealand as he found that there are many opportunities here as compared to other countries.

5. **FINDINGS**

These five case studies have been selected as they best conveyed the common themes emerging from this study and the experiences of the students as researchers themselves.

Current international students often found the New Zealand teaching system very different to what they had been used to in their own country. They found lecturers spoke too fast and they could not keep up with what was said and often did not understand what was required in the way of new types of assignments. In general they found the New Zealand domestic students friendly but unsophisticated. Students from China generally found they had more freedom in New Zealand and benefited from the lack of news censorship. However, all international students reported a sense of loneliness and homesickness when they first arrived. A common reason for choosing New Zealand as a place to study was the lower cost of living and lower tuition fees.

Recent graduates found that they often had difficulty in obtaining employment in their specialist field. Instead they often had to take other employment such as, in one case, working in a finger nail shop. These positions were often very lowly paid – well under the minimum adult wage of $NZ13.50 set by the New Zealand government (Ministry of Business, Innovation & Employment, 2012). The nail shop position paid $NZ5.00 per hour. Several of them reported they did not really understand the job market and did not realise that they were being exploited. One respondent said she would tell her friends back home to not come to New Zealand on a working holiday or look to settle down in New Zealand because she believed that New Zealand only wanted money from foreigners (for tuition fees) and didn’t want them to settle down (after graduating).

Skilled migrants often chose to come to New Zealand because of the natural physical environment and better opportunities for an improved lifestyle. However, again employment opportunities often did not work out as financially rewarding as expected and several respondents had had to seek a second, additional position to supplement their income. In general they found that their relatively lower English language skills were a barrier to improving their employment status and also isolated them in the wider community. While the adults said they never experienced any direct discrimination in New Zealand, several reported that their children had experienced racial discrimination at the hands of New Zealand children.

Other common themes emerged irrespective of whether they were current students, recent graduates, or skilled migrants. Frequently they came to New Zealand with their families. Gaining permanent residency was a major driving factor in deciding to come to New Zealand, but they soon found out that it was somewhat difficult to gain residency. Many of them became confused about their current status and were considering going back to their home country.

Chinese students and immigrants feel less discriminated against in New Zealand, perhaps because of the long history of Chinese living in New Zealand. The students most likely to experience discrimination appear to be those with clear visual cultural differences in dress arising from cultural traditions. For example, some Sikhs from India, in order to not be so visible in their new surroundings, end up shaving off their beards, cutting their hair and removing their turbans. Young female students have been physically attacked for wearing full purdah even though it might have only been as part of a display of national costume on a special occasion.

Homesickness is seen by all as a major factor in inhibiting initial settling into New Zealand and many have also reported the sense of isolation they felt from other students or work colleagues because of their differences in race, language, and cultural practices. Conversely, many reported that while they feel isolated, they believe that local New Zealanders thought they wished to be isolated because of the special support groups set up for international students and international business people. Some believed that many staff in educational institutions did what they could to help with inclusion by doing group assessment work and always making sure that each group had a mixture of international and domestic students.

Thus, identity and developing a sense of belonging and then becoming a “New Kiwi” is both constrained and enabled, as shown in the models below. In Fig 1, students and new settlers experience constraints of feeling exploited because the residency bar is set too high to set up their own businesses, based on their experience and qualifications. Their lack of contacts to get work can lead to underemployment, compounded by home sickness and
a lack of clear pathways to IT employment on completion of their study. Their disillusionment forces them to consider returning home.

However, as Fig 2 shows, where confidence is built by having family already successfully transitioned as ‘New Kiwis’, interaction with Kiwi students is more positive so that appropriate qualifications and work experience can lead to becoming new settlers. Residency for those new settlers is more likely to be within their capacity. Their dreams are less likely to be broken.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Up to 2010, New Zealand’s economy has benefited from the increase in international students and immigrants by $NZ2.1 Billion with 32,000 jobs in education and government services for mostly New Zealand domestic citizens (Coleman, 2009). Policies are in place to encourage international students and skilled migrants and the New Zealand government is currently seeking even more international students. There are support systems in place for these international students and skilled migrants.

But despite all the efforts of the government to provide positive immigration policies and laws and the on-going support provided by academic institutions, perceived work discrimination, self-reported doubt of English language skills, relative isolation as a new settler, and the current economic recession, it may not be a good time for potential immigrants to seek permanent residence in New Zealand.

Even if the graduate or skilled migrant has the requirements of a good character, good health, good educational background, and high English scores in IELTS, it is very difficult for them to gain successful employment. Many international students believe it is almost impossible. This means that despite government policy, many international graduates and immigrants believe they have little or no chance to settle down in New Zealand.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

Because of the obvious gaps between government policy and practical implementation and the broken dreams disclosed in this study, more research needs to be done on the ways to smooth the pathways to residency in New Zealand for potential new settlers with the required IT vocational qualifications and experience.

The significance of these issues can be recognised within ongoing conversations established between the various stakeholders. These include; New Zealand government policy makers in immigration and education, the international divisions of tertiary providers, representatives of new settlers organisations, and the international students and new settlers in ITPs themselves.

The duty of care that we hold as IT professionals to the common good should not let raw measures of economic growth be set up against human hopes and aspirations.
REFERENCES


