

Thinking about re-entry in new ways

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Introduction

Recent statistics from New Zealand's Immigration Service show an increasing number of international students coming to New Zealand remain in New Zealand at the completion of their studies. The Department of Labour examined 47,418 students who began their study in 1999/00 and 2000/01, over a period of 57-months. Within that period, 27% (12,596 students) transitioned to work or residence. Students who studied at school had the highest rate of transition residence, at 24 percent. Most of the students who gained residence stayed in New Zealand long-term.¹ This is a finding echoed in other countries, like Australia.² New Zealand research shows that the aspiration for permanent residence is one of the significant reasons why international students come to New Zealand to study in the first instance, although there is a higher number who want to stay than those who actually achieve the goal of staying³

The interest in international students who stay in the New Zealand once they graduate is of interest to those involved in migration, business and policy formation and delivery. Alongside the high proportion of New Zealand's Asian population who are New Zealand-born, this trend of international students, who are often Asian themselves, staying in New Zealand, adds to New Zealand's demographic diversity.

¹ Paul Merwood (2007), *International students: studying and staying on in New Zealand*. Wellington: Department of Labour and Education New Zealand. Retrieved from http://www.educationnz.org.nz/indust/InternationalStudents_Final%20Report.pdf. April 22, 2008

² Michiel Baas (2006), 'Students of migration: Indian overseas students and the question of permanent residence', *People and Place*, 14 (1), 9-23

³ Merwood, 2007

While there are increasing numbers of international students who stay in New Zealand, the vast majority of international students who come to New Zealand return to their countries of origin or migrate elsewhere. Regrettably, data of the movement of this population is difficult to ascertain: there is no way to measure the movement of people once they leave New Zealand, unless they return to New Zealand or are New Zealand residents or citizens. Those that are on student visas may be tracked by their educational institutions in the course of contacting alumni, but alumni information is only ever provided voluntarily. Students who do not provide their post-study contact details to their *alma mater*, and do not update those contact details, are not tracked in any other way. While data surrounding students transitioning to residence in New Zealand are becoming richer through using information provided on arrival and departure cards, alongside information already gathered through educational and immigration data, the same cannot be said of students who leave New Zealand at the completion of their studies. This remains a black hole of data and a frustration to researchers who want to quantitatively measure the movement of people.

There are obvious benefits to engaging with those students that stay in New Zealand. These benefits are being increasingly recognised by policy and business alike, particularly as New Zealand engages more and more economically with the Asian region and as New Zealand's Asian-born and New Zealand-born Asian populations increase.

Likewise, there are benefits to New Zealand to engage with students who return to Asia or migrate elsewhere. However, with some notable exceptions, there has

been little publicly available research on this population.⁴ There is, however, a growing body of research. A search of the Database of Research on International Education held by the Cunningham Library at the Australian Council of Educational Research under 're-entry' comes up with 18 entries, most of which are dominated by only a few scholars including work that I have undertaken on this topic over the last eight years.⁵ Papers on re-entry of international students are often in the form of conference proceedings, or in academic journals, so are not necessarily widely accessible to the public, educationalists or international students. There are also theses currently underway, at both Masters and Doctoral level, which include as part of it comment on Asian students in New Zealand or Asian students as part of larger Asian migrant communities. Not surprisingly, most of these theses are being undertaken by social scientists in the fields of geography, Asian studies or sociology. There is also ongoing work that I am doing with Terry McGrath, including a book on working with international students that devotes an entire chapter to re-entry, which will be published later this year.⁶

⁴ However, see Terry McGrath, Paul Stock & Andrew Butcher (2007) *Friends and Allies: The Impact of Returning Asian Students on New Zealand-Asian relationships*, Outlook Paper No. 5. Wellington: Asia New Zealand Foundation.

⁵ Andrew Butcher (2000), 'International students and the internationalisation of education in Australia and New Zealand', *Norrag News*, 27:12-15; Andrew Butcher (2001) 'Home is where the heart is: the re-entry of international students into their countries of origin' *World Views*, 6:12-15; Andrew Butcher (2002), 'A Grief Observed: Grief Experiences of East Asian Students returning to their countries of origin', *Journal of Studies in International Education* 6,(4), Winter, 2002, 370-384; Andrew Butcher (2004), 'Departures and arrivals: international students returning to the countries of origin', *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal* 13, 3: 275-303; Andrew Butcher, Terry McGrath & Paul Stock, (2008), 'Once Returned, Twice Forgotten? Asian students returning home after studying in New Zealand', *New Zealand Population Review* in press

⁶ Andrew Butcher and Terry McGrath (forthcoming), *Working with International Students*, Palmerston North: ISM

Current or new initiatives in research

A year ago I would have said that research on the re-entry of Asian students into Asia was the preserve of a small but growing number of academic theses. Postgraduate students, largely in the social sciences, were exploring re-entry as a worthy topic for research.

However, in the last year, three major research initiatives have, or are about to, get underway. The Asia New Zealand Foundation, of which I am the Research and Policy Director, produced a research paper on re-entry last year⁷ and is about to commission a tracking study of Asian international students who study business in New Zealand, examining what these students do, or at least aspire to do, once they finish studying in New Zealand.

New Zealand's Ministry of Education is devoting NZ\$90,000 to research on tracking New Zealand's international alumni in Asia in a large-scale longitudinal study that is due to begin in late 2008. Associate Professor Manying Ip of the School of Asian Studies at the University of Auckland, and a Trustee of the Asia New Zealand Foundation, is also undertaking significant Taiwan-funded research in this area, looking particular at Chinese migration, of which students are a significant part. Asia:NZ is also commissioning a series of papers looking at New Zealand's Asian population, including its international students. These papers will examine the Asian population nationally⁸, and in New Zealand's largest city Auckland⁹ and its largest South Island city, Christchurch¹⁰.

⁷ McGrath et al, 2007

⁸ Richard Bedford and Elsie Ho (forthcoming), *"Asians" in New Zealand: Implications of a Changing Demography*, Outlook Paper No. 7, Wellington: Asia New Zealand.

⁹ Ward Friesen (2008), *Diverse Auckland The Face of New Zealand in the Twenty-First Century?* Outlook Paper No.6, Wellington: Asia New Zealand Foundation.

In broader academic debates, there is recognition that how we conceive of migration is changing. Whereas once we may have thought of migration as being a one-way process – leaving one country and entering another – there is now a greater recognition of circulatory migration and return migration. That is, some migrants may migrate from their country of origin to one country and then onto a third country, or may return to their country of origin.¹¹ Major work is also being undertaken by New Zealand's departments of Labour and Statistics to measure the settlement experiences of migrants over a long period of time¹² but it is unclear at this stage whether the data will be able to be broken down to the level of international students.

Circular migration is an issue that may also be relevant to international students. Therefore, what we mean by 're-entry' necessarily has to take on a more complex, and perhaps complicated, hue. It is not unreasonable to suppose that a professional, who studied in one country, returned to his or her country of origin and found that they didn't settle there, then migrated to a third or fourth country, ostensibly for work but perhaps because their re-entry experiences in their country of origin were not what they had expected them to be. Another factor could be because institutions in New Zealand are marketing themselves as a training ground for a global market. For example, UCOL, a private tertiary education provider, have a nursing programme which attracts Indian students, which is marketed on the basis of being a chain migration opportunity, leading

¹⁰ Ward Friesen (forthcoming), *Asians in Christchurch*, Outlook Paper No. 8, Wellington: Asia New Zealand Foundation

¹¹ This can be seen in data on migration movements to and from New Zealand – see Philippa Shorland (2006), *People on the Move: A Study of Migrant and Movement Patterns to and from New Zealand*, Wellington: Department of Labour.

¹² See <http://www.stats.govt.nz/survey-participants/individual-hh-surveys/lisnz.htm>

to work in the UK or the USA, rather than as an opportunity to gain residence or employment in New Zealand.

Not all international students will have this level of flexibility, of course, and some may have to return to their country of origin whether they want to or not, but for those that have a choice – of which there may be an increasing number – then re-entry to their country of origin may just be one step in several migratory moves. These rational individual choices aside, however, there are three broader themes that I want to touch on by way of example and assertion that how we conceptualise re-entry may need to change. These three areas are: the impact of technology; the impact of ‘soft’ political participation; and the impact of increasingly diversified ‘host’ societies.

The impact of technology on re-entry

We cannot underestimate the impact of technology in the way that we conceive of the movement of international students from one country to another, or in the way that we conceive of the relationships that international students have with their home country. An increased accessibility to fast, cheap technology, including email, but also mobile telephones, internet chat and Skype, means that international students can retain contact with their home countries in ways that they couldn't do ten years ago. The growth and ubiquity of this technology is staggering. International students can talk to, text or email their parents in their home country several times a day. Indeed, many parts of Asia have far faster broadband speeds than most of New Zealand.

This ubiquity of technology has both a positive and a negative impact on the re-entry of international students. The positive impact is that re-entry can begin well before international students physically return to their countries of origin. The ability to read newspapers from their countries of origin, or even look for employment, is increased significantly. But there is also a negative consequence. While anybody who travels overseas remains interested in what is going on in their home country, where that becomes a barrier to engaging meaningfully with the host society then it begins to affect issues of integration. Where international students are not having the experiences in the host country that they had expected, where they are not making friends easily, enjoying courses, keeping physically or mentally well, or being provided the pastoral care that they require, then it becomes very easy to be back in their country of origin in every other way than actually *physically* being there. These students can maintain emotional connections with family and friends in their countries of origin, read newspapers, download podcasts, read blogs, all sourced from their country of origin. With the exception of actually turning up to class in their host country, in every other way – including eating familiar foods – they are living their same life but just in a foreign country.

There is very little, if any, research in New Zealand on the impact of technology on the experiences of international students in New Zealand, except for measurements on its use by international students, which is self-reported in any case. The reality is that the technology is here to stay; there is no conceivable situation where international students will rely less heavily on cheap, accessible technology. And the use of this technology is also a leisure activity for many international students; in other words, they will spend their spare time on the internet. The challenge then is to direct the energy and time that are used in this

way toward assisting international students to integrate into their host country on one hand and preparing them for re-entry into their countries of origin on the other hand. This might mean that re-entry courses or material would ideally be delivered via the internet rather than in the form of seminars or printed booklets, and through telling stories through commonly used websites like YouTube and Facebook. Social networking sites, like Facebook, could be effectively used to connect students who have returned to their countries of origin with those who are about to return to their countries of origin, and it might be that graduate groups increasingly exist in virtual rather than in physical forms, in what some scholars refer to as 'computer mediated communities'.

'Soft' political participation

The second issue I want to raise is what I have called 'soft' political participation of and by international students. To put this in other terms: the connections between a country of origin and its citizens around the world brought about by cheap technology can mean that the reach of a country of origin to a citizenry is wider than it used to be.¹³ So national politics in, say, Malaysia will be followed closely by Malaysians living abroad; Australians who live abroad are required to vote in the General Elections (as are all Australians); Chinese students in New Zealand participate in a pro-China march; and Italians have an Australian who is a Member of Parliament representing the Italian population in Australia. International students from particular religious backgrounds can both retain links to religious groups in their homeland and, given the increase in religious diversity in major cities around the world, can practice their religion in their host

¹³ For discussion on this area more broadly, see Michael Fullilove (2008), *World Wide Webs: Diasporas and the International System*, Sydney: Lowy Institute for International Policy

country. International students can be recruited by security agencies or may place higher demands on their country's embassy in the host country if they have complaints about their experiences. International students can participate in political processes relating to their home country, through voting, dual citizenship (where that is allowed), advocacy or political agitation in other forms. National boundaries are no barrier to their involvement in the political or social issues of their home country. This can have implications for re-entry in that international students may already be involved in issues relating to their country of origin and, through reading the newspapers, blogs and other media from their country of origin, may be better prepared to re-enter than those of previous generations.

Additionally, because international students are a more vulnerable group in comparison to the general student population, they are also at a greater risk of being exploited by extremist groups, who may seek to recruit them to a particular social, political or religious cause. Therefore, international students who do not become connected into *bona fide* university clubs, for example, may be more open, and perhaps less discerning, than others and put themselves at greater risk. This is an issue that Terry McGrath and I raised in some work we did a few years ago on campus groups that link back into the community: while the vast majority of these groups are fine, there are some exceptions that are dangerous.¹⁴ Regulation may be taking a solution a step too far, but at the very least maintaining good relationships with university authorities is an important

¹⁴ Terry McGrath and Andrew Butcher (2004), *Campus-Community Linkages in the Pastoral Care of International Students with specific reference to Palmerston North, Wellington and Christchurch*, for the Ministry of Education and Education New Zealand.

element in being taken seriously by both international students and the university itself.

The implications of diverse host societies

My final point relates to the diversification of host societies. Here I want to devote my discussion entirely to New Zealand, because not only do I know it best but also because it presents some unique challenges to those of us working in the international student 'space'. New Zealand's Asian population is proportionally twice that of Australia's. At the 2006 census, approximately ten percent of New Zealand's population identified themselves as Asian. Statistics New Zealand project that by 2026, 16 percent of New Zealanders will identify themselves as being 'Asian'. Compare this to twenty years ago when only 3 percent of New Zealand's population identified themselves as 'Asian'. And given that the majority of New Zealand's international students come from Asia, they are finding that there are cities in New Zealand, particularly Auckland, that have familiarity to them.

As an aside, countries in Asia, such as Singapore and Malaysia, are marketing themselves to China's potential international students by saying that they have societies that understand the cultures, languages and food of students from other Asian countries and therefore are a better location for study than countries like Australia and New Zealand. However, with diversified populations in Australia and New Zealand, the issue of cultural unfamiliarity is lessened for international students, by degrees at least.

Geographers refer to 'ethnoscapes', being physical or cultural representations of particular ethnic groups. So, for example, Buddhist temples, Asian food stores, and the Lantern Festival are all ethnoscapes of Auckland's Asian population.¹⁵ The climate might be colder and the shops might still shut at 5.30pm but New Zealand cities are becoming visibly more Asian, both in terms of their populations and in terms of ethnoscapes. Asian students to New Zealand can watch Korean, Japanese or Chinese DVDs, eat ethnic Asian food, go into karaoke bars, socialise with co-nationals, and worship in a temple or a church in their own language.

This is the flip-side of the issue I mentioned earlier about international students' lack of integration because of the levels of emotional connectedness with their countries of origin. Increasing Asian populations in host societies will mean that any integration with majority cultures (in New Zealand, Pakeha, Maori and Pacific peoples) may be negatively affected and that their experiences of New Zealand, for example, will be mono-cultural, through an Asian cultural lens. This is in no way to belittle the importance of the familiar to these international students; having access to familiar foods, people and activities has been shown by research to have a positive impact on the mental and physical health of migrants. The challenge, however, will be for international students, particularly those who find it too difficult, or receive resistance, to engage with other cultures in the host country. These students are more likely to socialise, study and live with co-nationals or those who speak the same language that they do. Engaging less with host cultures will diminish one of the key experiences of studying abroad, namely experiencing another way of life and other cultures.

¹⁵ See Friesen 2008

Conclusion

So what we mean by re-entry needs to be re-thought and re-cast in ways that acknowledge some of the major social changes of the twenty-first century. I have identified three – the impact of technology, ‘soft’ political participation, and the impact of the diversification of host societies – but there will be others. The impact of technology means that students can retain contact with their countries of origin several times a day. ‘Soft’ political participation means that these students can also be involved in the social and political debates and issues in their countries of origin, even if they are not physically there. While the impact of the diversification of host societies means that there will be an increase in familiar things for many international students in their host contexts, particularly those from Asian countries. What these challenges provide us, however, are also opportunities to engage in new and innovative ways with international students, when they go and study overseas, and when they return home. Even with increasing numbers of international students remaining in the country where they studied after graduation, the issue of re-entry will still be relevant for the majority of international students. For that reason, we need to ask more questions, undertake more research and devote more resources to understanding re-entry better and equipping international students to deal with it well.