

Increasing Internationalisation of the Primary Sector: Funding the Coffers and Encouraging Cultural Diversity, or Disadvantaging 'Domestic' Students?

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ABSTRACT: This study reports the findings of an export education levy funded, small-scale collaborative research project conducted with 10 primary and intermediate schools in the greater Auckland region about the impact of international students on the workload of teachers. Findings revealed that leaders considered the compliance issues associated with international students were very high, but the additional income generated by these students was useful. Responses from the teachers 131 teachers surveyed were mixed as to the impact on workload of hosting international students. The research team proposed two levels of recommended changes for practice. The first involved reflections of the changes that could be implemented in practice in the local context of these schools, and the second wider national policy implications directed towards the Ministry of Education and the export education industry.

INTRODUCTION

The Asia 2000 organisation in Aotearoa/New Zealand estimates that the export education market (selling the education system to international students) is a \$NZD 1.7 billion enterprise (Smith, 2003). My own university has a policy of admitting up to 20 per cent of the total student population as full-fee paying international students.

Whilst more prevalent in the tertiary sector, the practice of what is known as the 'export education industry' (increasing internationalisation) also occurs in the compulsory schooling sector in primary and secondary schools in New Zealand. At the end of 2003 there were almost 4,300 international students studying in primary and intermediate schools in New Zealand and of these nearly 55 per cent studied in the greater Auckland region. The increasing internationalisation in Aotearoa/New Zealand, which prides itself on both its bi-cultural heritage and increasingly multi-cultural nature, brings both benefits and challenges to the schools involved – there is a significant impact. Increasing the number of international students poses a dilemma for some principals and their governing bodies, especially if there is a perception that it may adversely impact on both domestic and 'indigenous' students. Some of the benefits of internationalisation include the extra finance generated and increasing the ethnic diversity of schools. However, by contrast, some of the challenges include the perception that education is being 'sold', that the education system is being under-funded by central government, that schools are being forced into

more 'entrepreneurial' activities taking them away from the core duties, and that some schools are disadvantaged because it is the schools located in the more desirable locations (namely in high socio-economic status areas, urban areas) that are able to attract the majority of the international students.

In New Zealand, primary schools can charge up to a maximum of \$NZD 12,000 per international student and intermediate schools up to a maximum of \$NZD 14,089 (Smith, 2003). There are schools in the greater Auckland area that host almost 100 international students (one intermediate has 98 or nearly 12 per cent of its total student population), whilst the primary school with the largest number is 81 (or 9.2 per cent of its total student number). Obviously, this extra injection of income can be a real 'boon' for the schools involved but there is also evidence to suggest that many schools are now beginning to become reliant on this income source (see Education Review Office, 2003; New Zealand Educational Institute, 2002). This can be problematic given the volatility of the international student market especially from Asia due to instances of currency crises and phenomena such as SARS.

SOME NEW ZEALAND RESEARCH INTO INTERNATIONALISATION

I recently had the pleasure of leading a collaborative research team of academic-practitioners from ten diverse primary and intermediate schools in the greater Auckland metropolitan area. The research investigated the effects on teacher workload of hosting international 'foreign' full fee-paying students (see Smith, et al., 2004). The project was funded by the export education initiatives and administered by the Ministry of Education/Education New Zealand Trust.

Questionnaires about hosting international students were completed by 131 teaching staff (of the 215 staff employed in the seven case study schools), this was a response rate of almost 61 per cent. In addition, a longer questionnaire was completed by a nominated staff member in each institution who was responsible for the international student portfolio. The principals of the remaining three schools in the study provided additional data in the form of interviews and written responses.

The schools involved hosted between zero and 41 international students. The schools with the largest numbers of students were receiving between \$NZD 300,000 - \$660,000 per annum. Thus, it was a very lucrative and useful source of additional income.

The two most important *benefits* reported from hosting international students were the increased cultural diversity aspects and the additional income that international students generated for the benefit of the whole school. It is anticipated that these findings could be generalised to most schools hosting students. Some of the *concerns* raised by participants included behavioural and racial tensions, inequities, less teacher attention to other students, classroom language difficulties, and workload issues. Again, it is anticipated that these findings could be generalised to other schools in New Zealand hosting fee-paying international students. At the least, they warrant further investigation.

Participants also observed there were some positive changes in cultural practices in their schools as a result of hosting international students. These

included more cultural events reflecting the ethnic diversity of the school, and more recognition of students' background, customs and food types.

One of the most significant findings from the study was the issue of teacher workload. In particular, it was reported as 'somewhat high' by approximately 55 per cent of questionnaire respondents.

Two other general messages from principals about workload identified in the study were:

1. The onerous demands on their institutions by the Ministry of Education from the changes to the code of practice. The principals thought it was expensive, extensive and very demanding, taking on average some 50-60 hours to complete. Some leaders felt that top-down administrative changes ran counter to the self-managing philosophy of schools promoted since the *Tomorrow's Schools* reforms.
2. Six schools in the study were concerned about becoming reliant on this external income source.

At a strategic policy level, the research team made the following recommendations for the Ministry of Education and the export education sector/industry. These were:

1. Provide support to all primary and intermediate schools with international student programmes in the form of adequate resources, professional development and key personnel (e.g., international student advisers) who would be available for first language support and counselling. (This could be done on a contract, cost-recovery basis).
2. A tiered approach to fee-setting be implemented so that the number of students in the school determines the fees levied (we recommended that in order to be cost-effective approximately ten students were required).
3. Lessen the red tape and meaningless paperwork so that institutions can spend more time meeting the educational and pastoral care needs of the international students rather than the bureaucratic requirements.
4. Make decisions that promote our international student market, not decimate it.
5. Promote primary education as strongly as secondary and tertiary.

There are clearly generic messages here for educators involved in hosting international students throughout New Zealand.

SOME CHALLENGE FOR EDUCATIONALISTS/RESEARCHERS

The following challenges emerge for educators and researchers to better understand the impact of 'internationalisation' on educational institutions:

- a. For those in schools - consider the ways in which you could conduct collaborative research with your staff and community in research partnerships about the impact of international students in your particular educational context. (It would be useful to conduct these in conjunction with professional researchers based in local tertiary institutions).
- b. For those in tertiary institutions – urge academics to become involved in research on practice amongst your local community of learners. This supports the argument that universities and other tertiary providers have a responsibility to serve the research needs of their communities of practice, and to mentor others in the processes of ethical, rigorous and applied research.

Further research, both within New Zealand and overseas, can better inform strategic policy directions as well as school-based decision making when it comes to the emerging challenge of internationalisation of our schools. To this end the research team recommended that Education New Zealand and the Ministry of Education

more adequately funds an increasing number of practitioner-based research projects on this important area of education. In particular this future research should focus on:

- a. Broadening the current study of ten schools to a larger cohort and stratified sample of the schools where large concentrations of international students are hosted (e.g. Auckland, Christchurch, Wellington and Dunedin) to really ascertain the effects on teachers' workload from international students (in a larger context).
- b. Determining the extent to which schools are becoming reliant on this income source (through robust and independent research, from professional educational researchers).
- c. Determining the extent to which Maori students as tangata whenua might be unwittingly 'disadvantaged' through the export education strategy.

Such a research focus is likely to remain an important one both economically and politically as well as in the context of education for some time to come.

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