

Problems of students

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PROBLEMS OF (CHINESE) INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN NEW ZEALAND - AND HOW THE COMMUNITY CAN HELP

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The personal problems of international students in general and Chinese students in particular, studying in New Zealand, are categorised and discussed. Ways for central and local government, schools and the community to help are proposed.

THE AUTHORS

The paper is based on the personal and work experience of its authors.

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PART 1: BACKGROUND

1. INTRODUCTION

In the past four years, international students have flooded into New Zealand, bringing with them considerable economic benefit to the community: to schools, providers of accommodation (including homestays) transport operators, food outlets, entertainment centres and most other commercial sectors.

At it peak last year, the international education market was worth \$1,800,000,000 and was New Zealand's fourth largest industry.

The "feedstock" of that "industry" however, consisted almost entirely of some 80,000 young people from far-away countries seeking an education but also trying hard to get through late adolescence and young adulthood. In this paper we discuss their personal problems and suggest ways that central and local government, the schools and the community can help.

2. PROFILE OF AVERAGE STUDENT

It is useful to describe the profile of the "average" student studying in New Zealand at the present time. Of course all students are individuals who often differ considerably from the "average".

The average student arriving in New Zealand is likely to be Chinese, 18 years old, enrolled in a secondary school or language school, the only child in an extended family of no only a mother and a father but also two sets of grand-parents. Because of the cost of entry, the family is likely to have access to considerably more financial resources than is usual in their community. The student is likely to have busy, hard-working and successful parents and may have been brought up predominantly by one set of grand-parents.

As a consequence the young person is likely to have been well looked-after at home with unrestricted access to all services on demand - ie spoilt. With parents or grand-parents or a housekeeper at their beck and call, dealing

with personal laundry, cleaning and tidying their rooms, helping with household chores and preparing their own food may well be a rare experience for them. If from a single-child family, sharing and giving-in to peers and siblings may be a foreign concept. The student's experience with money will be mainly in the form of cash given to them by their parents. Their knowledge of and experience with banks, and managing cheque accounts and credit cards may be very limited. Very few students have any experience of earning their own money and for some, their capacity to spend being somehow related to their personal work output may be a surprising concept. Students from China are likely to have been tightly-controlled by their parents, with little experience of personal freedom and assuming personal responsibility for their actions.

PART 2: TYPES OF PROBLEMS

The problems experienced by international students may be divided into two classes:

Common problems: Problems that will be experienced by nearly all students.

Special problems: Problems that affect only particular students.

COMMON PROBLEMS

These are problems that nearly all students will need to deal with at some time.

3. HOMESICKNESS

General melancholy arising from being away from home and family. This can occur at any time but is particularly marked at the beginning of the first extended period away from home. This tends to ease with time when the student has settled into a new routine with new friends.

It is probably best treated by being kept busy.

4. FAMILY WORRIES

These can be a general anxiety associated with separation or with limited academic success or money and the financial burden imposed on the rest of the family.

Requires counselling.

5. LANGUAGE BARRIERS

As might be expected, Chinese students sometimes arrive with only a basic knowledge of idiomatic spoken English.

Because of this, there is often incomplete understanding of what is being said. For the sake of politeness the student may say "yes" (meaning "I can hear you") even when they do not necessarily agree. This can lead to misunderstanding and confusion - with arrangements set in motion on the basis that the student has indicated agreement.

It is very important to determine that the student has completely understood the conversation and is clearly agreeing to arrangements.

6. STUDY PRESSURE

Apart from striving for academic success, there may be a stigma associated with being forced (by low school grades or low English ability) to enrol for a mere diploma instead of a more highly-prized degree.

The student needs to understand that the diploma can be a pathway to the degree qualification.

7. HOMESTAY PROBLEMS

Food is common source of problems, with many homestays offering their standard family fare without any real allowance for the preferences of their boarder. Asians generally like rice and green vegetables with their meals and do not like potatoes and large amounts of fatty meat especially lamb/mutton. Food preferences are formed early, are culturally-based and generally cannot be changed even over a lifetime. Students will seek out Asian style food even if they have to pay for their other meals as well.

Excessive use of heating and hot water for showers is a common source of friction between students and their homestays. Rules should be clearly stated and enforced from the beginning, fairly and consistently.

Most students have cell phones and telephone cards for cheap calls home. There should be no need for disputes if arrangements are put in place early.

If students require internet access (they all do!) this can be a separate service arranged and paid for by them. They

should be firmly warned that broadband access is not unlimited in volume, and that downloading of Chinese movies every day etc will result in huge costs chargeable to them.

8. MAKING FRIENDS WITH LOCAL STUDENTS

Where there are a large number of international students, local students may feel invaded and it may not be cool is fraternise with the invaders. Local students may form cliques keeping international students at arms length eg by talking in a slang with many "in" references which is impenetrable by the international students. The international students in turn may form groups based on their place of origin and home language.

9. CULTURE SHOCK

Occurs when the student comes to the realisation that the place they are expected to function in is completely different cultural environment.

See <http://edweb.sdsu.edu/people/CGuanipa/cultshok.htm>

SPECIAL PROBLEMS

10. MONEY PROBLEMS

TOO LITTLE

In spite of what was generalised above, some students come from families that have scrimped and saved to get them overseas. To them saving every dollar is important. This may result in ridiculous or even dangerous extremes of self-denial in food, heating, warm clothing and haggling over small amounts of money so as to minimise cost to their families. When the bill for the next term's study arrives, they may feel anxiety and guilt about the financial burden imposed on their families. Such pressure can seriously affect their studies. Students need to be counselled to understand that small savings are counterproductive if it leads to ill-health and undue worry resulting in failure and their families have already accepted the cost of their education when they decided to let them go overseas.

TOO MUCH

At the other extreme are students who have access to incredible amounts of funds - sufficient to buy several new cars, book out a massage parlour for their birthday, binge at the casino and so on. Often these students have gullible parents who are easily persuaded that the student requires thousands of dollars for books or extra course fees or for accommodation or high tens of thousand of dollars for a car. It would be helpful if schools and the government were to publish a list of expenses, in Chinese, for the guidance of parents - so they understand the cost of living in New Zealand and are not misled by their children.

MONEY MANAGEMENT

It is common for students to arrive in New Zealand and naively present a plastic bag with tens of thousands of dollars in \$US100 bills. They may carry this money around for days before depositing it in a bank, oblivious of the danger of being robbed. Others may blab about the cash they have access to or the wealth of their parents - making themselves the potential target of kidnappers and extortionists - who in many cases are themselves Chinese students or newly-arrived Chinese immigrants.

GAMBLING

Gambling among students is a problem worthy of a paper by itself. Suffice to say that it is not necessarily a "victimless crime", because after suffering the inevitable losses, the students may be driven to desperate measures such as attempting kidnapping, bank robbing and prostitution.

11. ALCOHOL

Traditionally, alcohol has not been a problem with Asians, many of whom are made physically uncomfortable if required to consume more than a nominal amount. However these days, exposure to the "Hollywood lifestyle of the rich and famous" means that young men in particular may develop an alcohol habit. With virtually unlimited funds for drinking, the problem can easily get out of hand. Some young women may merely wish to enjoy the atmosphere of a pub or club rather than have a wish to drink. Peer pressure also has a part to play in unwise drinking. The problems associated with alcohol abuse are well-documented.

12. DRUGS

There appears to be little empirical evidence of a widespread drug problem among Chinese students. However the problem may be well-hidden and not manifest itself in "adult" company.

13. ANXIETY, DEPRESSION AND SUICIDE

ANXIETY

The causes of anxiety include: fear of failure, stresses related to study and the inability to cope with schoolwork and homework.

Anxiety may also arise from a lack of language skills: the student may be frustrated by their difficulty in

communication their problems. Anxiety may lead to eating problems including "comfort eating" and borderline bulimia and anorexia. Anxiety may also lead to depression.

DEPRESSION

May arise when the student's anxiety are not relieved. Depression is another major subject requiring specialist input.

SUICIDE ATTEMPTS

Slashing of wrists and similar acts are generally a form of attention-seeking by the student rather than serious attempts to kill themselves.

These may be triggered by prolonged difficulties communicating with homestays.

14. APPEARANCE

For girls in particular worries about appearance may be related to excess weight and eating problems.

Typically girls wish to retain the slim shapes they had on arrival but find this difficult with a typical kiwi diet, plus indulging in comfort food and snack items such as ice cream, chips and chocolate, which are relatively cheap and of better quality in New Zealand.

They don't want to return home and have their family and friends commenting on their increased weight. This can lead to dangerous dieting and the taking of slimming medicines including various Chinese formulations that are known to be extremely dangerous.

15. SEXUAL HEALTH

In New Zealand there is a total lack of control in living arrangements once the international student leaves secondary school. They are free to experiment with mixed flatting and "moving in together" like their kiwi counterparts.

However, there is little or no sex education in Chinese schools. Students learn by the tried and true method of discussing it with their best friends and trial-and-error.

Statistics in New Zealand show Chinese girls are not using the pill but relying on condoms -supposedly to be supplied by the male partner.

The result is that Chinese girls now make up a significant proportion of pregnancy terminations by abortions.

For girls, their menstrual cycle can be disturbed or delayed by change of climate, and diet. This can be a serious worry especially if they have been experimenting with unprotected sex before or after arriving.

16. RELATIONSHIPS

Boy/girl relationships between Chinese students are very intense and not as casual as between young kiwis of the same age.

If a girl drops a boy or is "unfaithful" there is often an extreme confrontation, sometimes resulting in mayhem and murder.

Chinese girls feel pressurised into having sex when they form relationships with kiwi boys -when they themselves are only interested in friendship and learning more about western-style relationships.

17. BEREAVEMENT SERIOUS ILLNESS AT HOME

Students are seriously affected by news that a parent/grandparent may be seriously or terminally ill. They will generally drop everything and go home. While justified in some cases, this may be a panic reaction, which results in a waste of time and money.

18. PROCRASTINATION

Procrastination may arise when the student feels that there is a total lack of information and support to make decisions.

This can take extreme forms like delaying study course decision right up to and beyond a deadline.

The western education model allows many choices and freedom of choice, unlike in China where even the major choices are pre-determined.

PART 3: CROSS-CULTURAL ISSUES

UNDERSTANDING OVERSEAS STUDENTS FROM CHINA

19. THE ONE-CHILD-FAMILY

The typical student from China comes from a one-child family the result of strict population-control measures imposed some 25 years ago.

In a culture where traditionally children and particular boys have been highly prized, this one child is seen by the family of mother, father, and two sets of grand-parents as the embodiment of all their dynastic hopes and dreams, the one hope of the family continuing into the future.

In a socialist country with Chinese characteristics, where making money is once again glorious, the parents must work very hard to achieve their goals and it is often left to one set of grandparents or the other to bring up this precious child.

Grandparents, already notorious for spoiling their grandchildren in a large family, concentrate their efforts to ensure the well-being and happiness of this child. In the process the child is never allowed to want for anything, has his/her demands immediately attended to and enjoys the best of everything - all the time.

20. GUANXI AND CORRUPTION

Even now, the rule of law is not strong in China. People cannot always depend on the law and due process to get a fair deal but must depend on a system guanxi.

Guanxi is a pervasive system of reciprocal favours and preferential access under which anything, including extra-legal arrangements could be possible under some circumstances. From the outside this can appear to be a form of corruption.

A child in a well-to-do family will have been exposure to the operation of the guanxi system and will regard this as quite normal.

Thus they see nothing particularly wrong in using a falsified driver's license or paying for falsified attendance records from a shonky language school. If I can pay for it, it must be OK.

21. UNDERSTANDING A NON-WESTERN WAY OF LIFE

Having grown up in liberal democratic society based on Judeo-Christian principles we tend to think that the important things governing human relationships include: truth, equality, liberty, the paramount importance of the individual, the rule of law and so on.

However in Chinese society other concepts have pre-dominated- such as:

- Preserving face and appearance

- Money = power = happiness

- Duty to the family

- The importance of the group (including the State) over the individual

For students it may be more important not to shame the family rather than to tell the truth.

22. EDUCATION IN CHINESE CULTURE

The Chinese have a great respect for education.

This has its roots in the ancient system of State examinations whereby any peasant boy could compete against the scion of the powerful families to gain a position as a local, provincial or even central government official by passing a series of examination after studying the classics.

Education has always been the first priority for any Chinese family.

23. STUDY METHODS AND PROBLEM SOLVING SKILLS

The New Zealand approach to study is significantly different from the Chinese method.

The Chinese approach assumes that the teacher know everything and the student is there is received and accept the teacher's wisdom. Good grades are obtained by regurgitating the teacher's ideas.

The western approach to learning is that the student should look for and discover the truth him/herself. Making mistakes is part of the learning process. Marks are earned for devising and following a logical process of investigation. The teacher expects to be challenged.

Chinese students, because of their (lack of) training in this area may lack problem solving skills expected in kiwi students.

They need to learn to identify the real problem and to break down the total problem into a hierarchy of sub-problems which are solved one at a time.

24. EXAMINATION ANXIETY

This is common to all cultures - but exacerbated by the relative importance placed on gaining at least a pass in the course and the social stigma in Chinese society associated with academic failure.

25. COUNSELLING

In the west, it is common for students to seek counselling for problems. However, Chinese students may think that any form of counselling has a degree of stigma attached - that there something wrong with not being able to cope.

On the other hand there may be a lack of counsellors. familiar with Chinese students' background and culture. A European counsellor, even if culturally sensitive may not be perceived as such by a Chinese student.

PART 4: HELPING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS COPE

26. WHY BOTHER?

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE INTERNATIONAL STUDENT MARKET

By now it must be obvious to nearly everyone the size and importance of the international student market. For central government, it is the country's fourth largest industry with most of its earnings in US dollars. (The GST alone is worth \$225,000,000.) Its existence has funded the upgrading of many school facilities and created jobs. In addition it is giving access to the hearts and minds to thousands of the future business and political leaders with almost unimaginable benefits for future foreign relations.

For local government the students bring benefits to their area from homestay money easing the mortgage costs of the ordinary householder to stimulating development of residential and retail properties and adding a boost to the sales in every sector.

For schools, it is much welcome source of funding for all sorts of projects many of which have languished for years awaiting for government funding.

For local ethnic communities, students represents an opportunity to refresh and update their cultural resources: instead of preserving the cultural relics of the 1950s and 60s (the period of earlier, smaller migration) there is an opportunity to get in touch with the (youth) culture of Asia in the 21st century - shocking as this may be with coloured hair, money, "sex, drugs(?) and rock'n'roll."

27. HOW CAN CENTRAL AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT, SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES HELP?

In discussing "help" we should not just be talking about the selfish desire to protect our short-term income stream. By making international study in New Zealand a positive experience, the benefits will be long-term for both the students and New Zealand.

a) CENTRAL GOVERNMENT

Central government can help by:

- Liaising with overseas governments (particularly that of the PR China). At present there is a serious dichotomy between what is permitted in New Zealand with its liberal democratic, free market, laissez faire system and what is expected from the Chinese side with its tradition of stronger central control.
- Providing and widely disseminating accurate information about New Zealand and New Zealand education - partly to counter the misinformation and less than accurate information propagated unscrupulous agents.
- The Government vastly under-spends in this area having regard to the economic importance of the export education sector and is being beaten at every turn by the likes of Australia and Ireland, in terms of processing visas, quality control and monitoring of institutions.

b) LOCAL GOVERNMENT

So far as can be discerned, very few local authorities have any programme to assist students who now make up a permanent part of their community.

The exceptions may be Christchurch and North Shore. In Christchurch the City Council supports the Asian Youth Trust, which is a private initiative to help international students in various ways. Among suggestions that are now being actively pursued are:

- An International Student's Service Centre offering services such as counselling, orientation and general assistance with information about educational institutions in the area, jobs, visas and so on.
- An International Students' Association.

A Local Authority's overview and seal of approval may be enough to allow private enterprise to provide these services at little or no cost to the Local Authority.

Under the Local Government Act 2002 there is a duty for Local Authorities to consult with all their communities (not

just the Maori Community) in developing policies and structures. This is a fertile area for the student community and the local ethnic communities to cooperate with Local Government

c) SCHOOLS

Schools could help address the problem by experimenting with:

- A buddy system assigning a local student to each international student.
- A comprehensive orientation on arrival including an information package for homestays.
- Sending an information pack to parents in Chinese to inform them of the cost of basic services and the customs and laws in New Zealand - parents are often very naïve or ignorant about conditions here and are bamboozled by their kids into funding extravagant but apparently essential goods and services - like sports cars.
- A sister school model in which the NZ school maintains a long-term close relationship with a compatible school in China.
- Hosting Chinese teachers for their professional development - but while in NZ the Chinese teachers can act as teaching assistants and counsellors for Chinese students.
- Sending NZ teachers on an exchange programme to their sister school in China as a part of their professional development so that they have a better appreciation of the students' background and problems and learning about China and Asia generally.

In addition, schools should be more aware that not all recruitment agents are equal; and work more with agents who are knowledgeable about the school and in turn provide them with appropriate information.

d) LOCAL ETHNIC COMMUNITIES

There are many opportunities for local ethnic communities to "adopt" international students as a group to help guide them away from the more negative and destructive forms of behaviour arising from the lack of parental guidance, access to excessive amounts of money.

- We have already mentioned the opportunities under the Local Government Act 2002.
- Chinese governmental organisations such as the Office of Overseas Chinese Affairs and the Chinese Ministry of Education may be willing to develop programmes jointly with local communities to provide teachers and counsellors for Chinese students.

27. CONCLUSION

The problems and opportunities, both financial and cultural, of international students from China are far too large to ignore.

Those countries, cities, schools and individual who can think, plan and allocate adequate resources to meet the challenges of this international phenomenon will reap the benefits immediate and well into the future.

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