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# Expectation–Reality Gaps in International Students' Study Experiences in New Zealand: Evidence from Graduate Diploma Students in a Private Training Establishment

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**Abstract**

This research investigated the gap between the initial expectations of students and the reality of studying overseas. Many countries, including New Zealand, have become important destinations for international students in recent years. When deciding to study in foreign countries, students are influenced by a number of factors in destination countries including the reputation of educational institutions, living costs, tuition fees, whether the country is easy to enter or not, the possibility of immigration, job opportunities, security and lifestyle. Therefore, this study explored foreign students' expectations compared with the reality of studying in New Zealand, in order to understand their views and motivations in studying in this country. Graduate diploma students from one private training establishment (PTE) have been considered as a case study. The study has applied a mixed method research approach – a combination of the elements of both quantitative and qualitative analysis. A questionnaire was used to collect primary data from a survey of 74 participants. The findings revealed that international students selected New Zealand (NZ) as a destination because they believed that the country had a safe and peaceful environment, a high possibility of permanent residency after study, and a well-reputed education system. They generally experienced difficulty in finding part-time work, which contradicts their prior expectations. They also experienced high living costs, challenges with PR expectations, and limited employment support. They found that study was harder in NZ than in their home countries because of the language barrier, cultural differences and a different education system. They suggested that educational institutions should provide support to help them find a job and should provide an internship programme. The findings of this study may be of interest to academics, researchers, education providers and policy makers.

**Keywords:** International Education, New Zealand, Private Training Establishments, Expectation and Reality



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## Introduction

Over the last few decades, the demand for international education has increased in the global market. New Zealand has experienced an increase in the flow of international students over last two decades. According to the Ministry of Education, about 131,805 full fee-paying international students had enrolled at education providers in New Zealand up until 2016. However, that number dropped to 41,360 due to COVID-19 in 2022 (Education New Zealand, 2025a). The enrollment numbers were steadily increasing to pre-pandemic levels, with 83,425 enrolments in 2024. Recently, the government has announced a policy with a target of doubling the international education sector's economic contribution of $7.2 billion by 2034 (Education New Zealand, 2025a; Education New Zealand, 2025b).

A survey conducted by Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) revealed that international students are now envisaging a wider range of study destinations (Paulino, 2019). As a result, a new list of popular destinations has emerged, like China, South Korea, and New Zealand (Pan, 2013). When deciding to study in foreign countries, students are influenced by a number of factors in destination countries including the reputation of educational institutions, living costs, fees, the exchange rate, whether the country is easy to enter or not, the possibility of immigration, job opportunities, security and lifestyle (Talukder, 2012; Tananuraksakul & Hall, 2011). Therefore, international students make overseas study decisions based on their expectations of the benefits they will gain from study in those foreign countries. Many studies have attempted to analyse the New Zealand international education sector. They have focused mainly on the trends of international students, the impact of international education on the domestic economy, education providers, accommodation, and policy formulation. They have not specifically discussed issues related to students' expectations and the reality of studying in New Zealand. This study investigated these issues that are related to actual experiences compare with these expectations in relation to study, employment, living costs, institutional support, and permanent residency. Student expectations have been recognised as a significant construct at the tertiary education level (Pinto & Anderson, 2013). The knowledge of international student expectations can also assist educators in the design of teaching programs (Voss et al., 2007). To understand student expectations will be helpful for universities in creating a suitable learning environment for them too (Ahmad, 2015; Mitsis & Foley, 2009). Therefore, this study investigated international students' expectations compared with the reality of studying in New Zealand, in order to understand their views and motivations in studying in this country. Graduate diploma students from one private training establishment (PTE) in New Zealand have been investigated as a case study.

The main research questions of this study are as follows:

RQ1: What expectations did international graduate diploma students have before studying in New Zealand?

RQ2: How did their actual experiences compare with these expectations in relation to study, employment, living costs, institutional support, and permanent residency?

RQ3: What expectation–reality gaps were most prominent among the students?



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RQ4: What institutional and policy implications can be drawn from these gaps?

## Literature Review

### 1. International student mobility and push–pull factors

The total number of international students has increased from 80,000 in 1975 (OECD, 2011) to 4.8 million in 2016 (International Organisation for Migration, 2018) and this figure increased to 7.3 million in 2023 (UNESCO, 2026). Traditionally, the USA and the UK were the two most important destinations for international students prior to the 1980s (Talukder, 2012). However, many countries, including New Zealand, have become popular destinations for international students (Pan, 2013). Like universities and polytechnics, private training establishments (non-state owned), which are not state funded in New Zealand, offer various diplomas, as well as bachelor's and master's degree programmes, especially focusing on international students. The number of international students enrolled at PTEs was around 67,000 in 2016. There were 817 education providers in New Zealand that catered to international students in 2016. Of these, 154 were private training establishments (PTEs). Of the PTEs, 50 were English language schools (ELSs) (Ministry of Education, 2018).

International students are moving to different countries to fulfil their educational and social needs and there are many studies which have been conducted in this area. A study conducted by Beech (2018) focuses on recent changes to the UK visa system which have led to a decline in the numbers of Indian students choosing to study towards a UK higher education. The researcher suggests that there is a need to think about the intersections between migration industries, visa regulations and international student mobility. Collins (2012) investigated the position of agents in student mobility by focusing on the development of export education activities since the early 1990s in New Zealand and the changing relationships of agents with the state, education providers and students. This study concluded by highlighting the need for research on agents and other intermediaries to focus in more detail on the manner in which these actors mediate different sorts of relationships, between migration/education industries and migrant/student social networks as well as between changing state liberalization and intervention and emerging industry formations. Many countries, such as Australia, Canada, Ireland, Switzerland, and the UK, have developed national policies to attract international students (Lomer, 2018).

Due to the demand for international education, students are leaving their home country to study abroad. The changing pattern can be understood with reference to the 'push-pull' model (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2012). The push factors play a significant role in encouraging students to leave their home country, and one of the push factors is the limited availability of places in higher education. Many Chinese students come to New Zealand after finishing their high school education due to the high level of competition to enter universities (Jamali, 2015). Another push factor is a weak domestic economy (Zheng, 2014). Many students move to different countries due to the weak domestic economy of their home country, having less job prospects compared to developed countries selected for study destinations. Students might also be attracted to certain



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countries because of pull factors such as perceptions of a high quality of life and high educational standards (Perkins & Neumayer, 2014) and the availability of part-time work (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2012). Potential students can also be discouraged from moving by high social costs (crime, lack of safety, and racial discrimination) (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2012), financial costs (Song & McCarthy, 2018) , and visa restrictions (Perkins & Neumayer, 2014). A proposed model by Azmat et al., (2013) provides a basis for identifying international students' expectations and aspirations and developing prospective international relations. Oyedokun et al. (2025) found that the main emigration intention of Nigerian medical and nursing students was to settle in the USA, The UK, and Canada – the top three desired destinations. Wamuti and Justman (2026) found that the main motivation for iinternational migration of Africa-born health workers to non-African countries was for safety, and permanent residency (even, by seeking asylum). Similarly, Ghundol and Muthanna (2026) found that Yemeni international students used two-stage migration approach: first they studied in China with an aim to move to developed countries for settlement permanently.

## 2. Expectation–reality gaps in international education

Expectations can be defined as beliefs about the likelihood that a service or product is associated with certain attributes, benefits, or outcomes (Coye, 2004). Expectation-disconfirmation, student satisfaction, and service quality are parts of understanding expectation-reality gaps in international students. Student expectations have been recognized as a significant construct at the tertiary education level (Pinto & Anderson 2013), so the tertiary industries need to comprehend those student expectations to provide them with a suitable learning environment (Ahmad 2015; Mitsis & Foley 2009). Understanding student expectations can be used to form a picture of their identity (Pinto & Anderson, 2013).

It is vital to consider the needs and expectations of international students. Moving away from their own countries could create various mental health issues such as homesickness, depression, frustration, a feeling of isolation, and struggling with adapting to a new culture and education system overseas . Research was conducted whereby 70 international students were interviewed from two institutes in New Zealand which had planned a unique consumer protection regime embodied in the New Zealand Code of Practice for the Pastoral Care of International Students (Sawir et al., 2009). Various problems are discussed in relation to language difficulties, finances, accommodation, personal safety and freedom from discrimination, and social integration. The study finds that support services do not fully cater for the needs of international students nor do they accord them their full range of potential rights (Sawir et al., 2009). Ibrahim et al. (2026) also found that there was a gap between globally oriented training and locally grounded job expectations. This is partly due to differences in international academic models to local practices. Another study seeks to assess international students' expectations and perceptions of service quality in South Africa (Govender et al., 2012). A survey was conducted of 215 international students, using the SERVQUAL model as the measuring instrument. The results indicate that there are gaps between international



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students' expectations and their perceptions of the service quality dimensions.

**3. Academic, cultural, and language adjustment**

International students face challenges in academic transition, cultural adaptation, language barriers, and social integration when studying overseas. It is important to understand the experiences (reality) that international students face during and after studying abroad. A study was conducted to measure international students' total experience in the Malaysian higher education sector (Milad et al., 2018). A theoretical research model was proposed with three stages (pre, during and post education). Specifically, this study proposed that the international student's total experience model includes university image, student expectations, past students' experiences, information sources and service quality (first stage). The second stage includes the level of satisfaction and the student's perceived performance. The third stage, the post stage, includes the international student's intention to continue with further study. A total of 535 questionnaires were collected from international students in Malaysia in order to test empirically the theoretical model using variance based structural equation modeling for the evaluation of measurement and the structural model. Statistical results imply that the model explains 65.5% of variances in international students' intentions to continue with further study. Moreover, this empirical study illustrates that the total experience of international students in public and private universities impacts the perceived value and service quality of the education (Milad et al., 2018).

A study conducted by Chavan et al. (2014) found that there were significant challenges with regard to the use of student expectations as the foundation for assessing students' service quality evaluations, due to the vague expectations of students, and their limited prior experience of the service from which to shape their expectations. Because the traditional dimensions of service quality were not sufficient to capture the depth of international and domestic students' service evaluations, this study proposed the inclusion of an additional two service quality constructs, namely, social benefits and co-creation/participation. Xiang and Lee (2026) also found that Chinese international students experienced language and cultural challenges when studying overseas. Medin et. al (2025) found that international students experienced challenges in food literacy, language barriers, and the social aspects of eating in Norway. Food cost was identified as the most significant challenge, thereby influencing food choices and eating habits, particularly among non-European students.

It is difficult for international students to adjust to a new education system and a new society. A study tried to examine the tensions that arise from the expectations of the student and the implicit rules that govern the academic and social environments of UK higher education (Kingston & Forland, 2008). The authors aimed to examine some of the issues that arise when cultures based on differing philosophies meet within a London university. To resolve such problems, they tried to narrow the gap between the expectations of international students and those of the academic staff. Working toward a synergy of educational cultures was recommended.



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A longitudinal field study captured the perceptions of a group of 51 international students over a one-year interval (Buchanan, 2019). The first anticipatory survey was carried out in India, and the follow-up was done in the USA at the end of a foreign sojourn semester. The study found that the students went home less impressed than they had expected to be in terms of the perceived general quality of American business education, as well as their abilities to make friends with the local people. Additionally, the observed preparation of American students for master's studies was not of nearly as high a standard as the foreign students had anticipated (Buchanan, 2019).

A study assessed the self-reported academic performance or success of international students and determined the degree of satisfaction of international students in New Zealand with educational, pastoral and support services, living conditions and social circumstances. Out of 3000 students, 62% of them said that New Zealand was their first choice as a study destination. The most important factors in selecting New Zealand were the English-speaking environment, safety, the quality of education and cost of study. Moderately important factors were relating to the "Kiwi experience," i.e. natural beauty and scenery, New Zealand lifestyle and culture, travel and adventure (Ward & Masgoret, 2004).

**4. Employment, migration, and permanent residency aspirations**

Most international students opted for study overseas because of developing skills for suitable jobs to gain permanent residency in their study destinations (Oyedokun et al., 2025; Wamuti and Justman (2026). Even, some cases they acquire skills in developing countries with an ambition of ultimately settle in a developed country (Ghundol & Muthanna, 2026). The motivations of international student mobility are influenced by future migration in a desired country (Schäfer, 2026).

Another study included a survey of international students undertaking a second-year accounting unit at a Melbourne-based university together with feedback from a small number of employers of accounting graduates. The results show that 84% of the international students in the sample intended to seek permanent residency (PR) in Australia and viewed the study of accounting as a means of helping them meet the requirements for PR status. Although most indicated that they intended to seek employment in the accounting field on graduation, the feedback from employers suggested that generally international accounting graduates are not sufficiently 'work ready' to be considered for graduate employment (Jackling, 2007).

In contexts like Australia, New Zealand and the UK, where international students have been seen as a supplement or even replacement for state funding of education, this tension appears to be even greater, as questions of the inherent value of education are supplanted as the business logics of maintaining quality, lowering cost and improving outcomes become central to the operation of institutions and the interests of the state (Martens & Starke, 2008). Ramia (2017) has carried out a comparative analysis of legal frameworks which guide institutions in their handling of international student rights in New Zealand and Australia. The comparison indicates increasing legalism in higher education, though more law does not necessarily coincide with better rights for students.



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Also indicated is the importance of institutions providing more and better information to students on rights.

**5. Institutional support and responsibility**

Institutional support to international students is an important factor for achieving their objectives – study, jobs and permanent residency. Academic support, career support, pastoral care, and transparency of pre-arrival information have impacts on students' satisfaction. This support may include proactive advising, peer mentorship and digital community, culturally responsive training, and integrated support for career development and immigration needs (Mai et al., 2025). However, there remains a 'support perception gap' between the expectation of international students and what institutions offer to them. This gap is associated with structural barriers such as limited career services, dynamic environment related to immigration policies and insufficient support for cultural adaptation (Mai et al., 2025). On the other hand, existing institutional supports are not equally accessed by international students due to limitations created by intersectional factors including ethnicity, gender, language proficiency, and socioeconomic status (Mai et al., 2025). For example, an Asian student may find harder and challenging as to cultural expectations and communication performance than a Latin American student. Therefore, considering these differences, institutions should design services that are inclusive to cultural competency and equity-oriented (Asempapa, 2019).

**6. Conceptual Framework**

The study adopted the conceptual framework of the Push-Pull factors Theory as developed by Lee (1966) with a view to understanding the rationale for the selection of NZ as an overseas study destination by international students. Lee's model argues that factors causing migrations are divided into two broad categories: push and pull. Push factors are things that are unfavourable about the home country that one lives in, and pull factors are things that attract one to another host country (Lee,1966). Similarly, this study included the theoretical basis of the Expectation–Disconfirmation Theory as used by Oliver (1980). This is partly because of understanding the expectation–reality gaps in international students' study experiences in New Zealand.

**Methodology**

Graduate diploma students from one Private Training Establishment (PTE) in New Zealand have been investigated as a case study. The study applied a mixed method research approach – a combination of the elements of both quantitative and qualitative analysis – for the broad purposes of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration, with a view to providing a better understanding of the research problem, and better addressing the research questions, than by using either method alone (Greene, 2008; Johnson et al., 2007). The advantage of mixed method research is that it combines the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative approaches and uses multiple worldviews or paradigms rather than the typical association of certain paradigms related



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to quantitative and qualitative approaches (Greene, 2008; Johnson et al., 2007). The study applied a convenience sampling technique to collect data from a 100-sample size. However, only 74 students participated is the survey. Among them, some did not complete all questions. Therefore, different questions have different number of observations ranging from 74 to 56. Due to time constraint, date collection was conducted within two weeks in class rooms through a face-face survey. Participants were recruited based on their current study (graduate diploma) and their participation in the survey was voluntary. The study considered all valid response for analysis of findings. A questionnaire was used to collect primary data. A structured survey questionnaire was designed with both closed and open-ended questions. The mixed method design is simply a survey questionnaire with closed-ended and open-ended questions. Therefore, the data sets include both quantitative information obtained from a closed-ended checklist and qualitative information obtained from open-ended questions. The questionnaire included the following major sections – demographic, jobs, study, living in NZ, PR, and post-study plan. The questionnaire was pilot-tested before the final survey was conducted. The closed-ended items used a combination of styles including categorical choices, Likert scales, and multiple options selection. The open-ended answers were included after a closed-ended question to understand the reasons for the selection of a specific category or an option. The study applied a percentage analysis technique to quantify response for each question. Qualitative answers were included with the quantitative analysis to strengthen understanding of each question (variable). This study used a univariate analysis technique. However, it used demographic variables such as gender, and ethnicity to understand similarities and differences across variables.

The study met the ethical standards of research by keeping the participants anonymous. Participation in this study was voluntary and a written consent was sought from participants prior to involvement in the study. They were informed about the objectives of the research project and had the right to decline participation.

## Analysis of Findings and Discussion

### 1. Findings

#### Background of the respondents

Table 1 presents the distribution of respondents by background characteristics. The highest number of respondents was from India (36.5% of the total). Among respondents, 55.4% of them were male, while 44.6% were female. 45.9% of the students were aged 21-25, while only 8.1% were aged 36-40. The results also showed that the majority of the respondents had a bachelor's degree (75.7%). 10.8% held master's degrees and 13.5% held other types of degrees.



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**Table 1: Distribution of background characteristics of respondents**

| Characteristic | | Frequency (in number) | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Gender | Male | 41 | 55.40 |
| | Female | 33 | 44.60 |
| | Total | 74 | 100.00 |
| Age group | 21-25 | 34 | 45.90 |
| | 26-30 | 24 | 32.40 |
| | 31-35 | 10 | 13.50 |
| | 36-40 | 6 | 8.10 |
| | Total | 74 | 100.00 |
| Country: | India | 27 | 36.50 |
| | China | 20 | 27.00 |
| | Brazil | 3 | 4.10 |
| | Others | 24 | 32.40 |
| | Total | 74 | 100.00 |
| **Education before enrolment** | | **Frequency (in number)** | **Percentage (%)** |
| Bachelor | | 56 | 75.70 |
| Master | | 8 | 10.80 |
| Others | | 10 | 13.50 |
| | Total | 74 | 100.00 |

**Note:** Percentages (%) are based on the total sample (N = 74).

**New Zealand as preferred country for study**

Table 2 shows whether New Zealand was the preferred country for overseas study. The majority of the students (71.6%) said that New Zealand was their first choice for study. The reasons as were the quality of life, job opportunities, possibility of permanent residency, flexible immigration policy, low tuition fees, friendly culture, stable economic and political environment, educational conditions, multiculturalism and friendly culture. The students for whom New Zealand was not the first priority had wanted to go to other countries such as Australia, Canada, the UK or the USA. Ward & Masgoret's research report (2004) on the experiences of international students in New Zealand, prepared for the Ministry of Education, had similar findings. In that study, 62% of the students said that New Zealand was their first choice as a study destination. The most important factors in selecting New Zealand were the English-speaking environment, safety, the international recognition of New Zealand, the quality of life, and natural beauty and scenery.

**Table 2: New Zealand as the Preferred Country for Study by Nationality (N = 74)**

| NZ preferred country for study | India | China | Brazil | Others | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Yes | 21(28.38%) | 15(20.27%) | 3(4.05%) | 14(18.92%) | 53(71.62%) |
| No | 6(8.11%) | 5(6.76%) | 0(0.00%) | 10(13.51%) | 21(28.37%) |



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**Note:** Values are presented as n (%). Percentages in the "Yes" and "No" rows are row percentages; percentages in the "Total" row are based on the overall sample (N = 74).

**Wish to apply for permanent residency after completing study**

A majority of the students wished to apply for permanent residency in New Zealand after completion of their studies. As they explained the main reasons: "I want to live and settle in NZ for good future". "I see a good environment for ling with family here because of good facility, better scope, and friendly environment". " In NZ, there is good welfare system, , higher salary, and nice natural environment". "There is a possibility of having good job as expected; also, the country is safe for family and has a good environment; there are good people here". Similarly, they considered that NZ has these positive factors to live in including a safe and peaceful environment for family and children, a good welfare system, higher salary, already having a good job as a manager, more opportunities, wanting to live in New Zealand, the small population, a good future, wanting to learn more from New Zealand, wanting to keep connections with New Zealand, less corruption, being a 'non-crime' country, wanting to improve English (at less cost), having gained significant work experience, low social inequality, less pressure, ease of becoming involved in society, the living standard, a better education system, culture, transparency and good working conditions. The few students who did not want to apply for PR in New Zealand gave reasons such as that they could not expect a prosperous future here, their jobs were not in the skilled list, they wanted to use their knowledge in their home countries, they were disappointed with the system, there were no good opportunities for qualified people, or they wanted to travel to another country. The push-pull factor model suggested that students might be attracted to certain countries because of pull factors such as perceptions of a high quality of life and educational standards.

**Opinions about gaining permanent residency**

Most of the students mentioned that gaining permanent residency (PR) in New Zealand is harder than they had thought before coming to New Zealand. They now believe that immigration into New Zealand is not that easy. Some of them also stated that there were fewer job opportunities in New Zealand than they had expected. There were other significant reasons why they now believed that it was harder to get residency. They mentioned that a large proportion of employers were not willing to support PR applications, job requirements are unexpectedly high for gaining PR, a good position is needed to apply for residency, it is hard to get a job related to previous study, increasing numbers of migrants are making for difficult, tough competition, the government has changed the immigration policy which makes it harder to get PR, and PR is a difficult process as it requires so many documents. A very few students thought that it was easier than expected to gain PR, because they had carried out research before coming to New Zealand. They also found that the rules are clear and that their previous educational background and current study would be helpful in gaining PR. Some of them thought that it would be easier to gain PR in New Zealand than in other countries, but they also mentioned that it depends on individual abilities.



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**Obtaining a part-time job whilst studying in New Zealand**

Table 3 shows that opinions on obtaining a part-time job whilst studying in New Zealand vary by gender and nationality. Both males and females (60.81% in total) found it harder to get a part-time job than they had expected prior to arrival. They found that it was not easy even to obtain a cleaning job without references. The students who had thought it would be harder to get a part-time job gave reasons such as that their friends had helped them with references or that they had known somebody before coming here.

**Table 3: Opinions About Obtaining a Part-Time Job by Gender (N = 73)**

| Gender | Easier than expected | As easy as expected | Harder than expected | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Male | 5 (6.8%) | 11 (14.9%) | 25 (33.8%) | 41 (56.2%) |
| Female | 7 (9.5%) | 5 (6.8%) | 20 (27.0%) | 32 (43.8%) |
| Total | 12 (16.4%) | 16 (21.9%) | 45 (61.6%) | 73 (100.0%) |

**Note:** Values are presented as n (%). Percentages are based on the total sample (N = 73).

Experiences regarding obtaining a part-time job differed significantly among different nationalities (see Table 4). Indian students had the highest proportion of total respondents (28.37%) who had found it harder to get a job than they had expected before coming to New Zealand, while none of the three students from Brazil had found it harder than expected. Students from countries other than China, India and Brazil had also found it harder than expected to find a job.

**Table 4: Opinions about obtaining a part-time job by nationality** (N = 73)

| Nationality | Easier than you thought | As easy as you thought | Harder than you thought | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| India | 1 (1.35%) | 5 (6.75%) | 21 (28.37%) | 27 (36.99%) |
| China | 6 (8.10%) | 5 (6.75%) | 8 (10.81%) | 19 (36.03%) |
| Brazil | 0 (0.00%) | 3 (4.05%) | 0 (0.00%) | 3 (4.05%) |
| Others | 5 (6.75%) | 3 (4.05%) | 16 (21.62%) | 24 (32.88%) |

**Note:** Values are presented as n (%). Percentages are based on the total sample (N = 73). Because only three Brazilian students participated, findings for this group should be interpreted cautiously and should not be generalized.

**Opinions on the prospects of getting a full-time job after graduating**

As presented in Table 5, the same percentage of males and females (12.16% of the total sample) thought that it would be difficult to get a full-time job after graduating due to lack of work experience in New Zealand and a lack of connections with local employers. The majority of the students (66.20%) were not sure whether they would be able to get full-time work after graduation. Indian students had the highest number and proportion of respondents (10.81% of the total) who thought it would be hard to get a full-time job after graduating, while none of the three students from Brazil thought that it would be difficult.



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**Table 5: Opinions about getting a job after graduation by gender and ethnicity** (N= 74)

| | | Easy to get a job | Difficult to get a job | Not sure | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Gender | Male | 4 (5.40%) | 9 (12.16%) | 28 (37.83%) | 41 (55.41%) |
| | Female | 3 (4.05%) | 9 (12.16%) | 21(28.37%) | 33 (44.59%) |
| Country | India | 1(1.35%) | 8 (10.81%) | 18 (24.32%) | 27 (36.49%) |
| | China | 3 (4.05%) | 3 (4.05%) | 14 (18.91%) | 20 (27.03%) |
| | Brazil | 0 (0.00%) | 0 (0.00%) | 3 (4.05%) | 3 (4.05%) |
| | Others | 3 (4.05%) | 7 (9.46%) | 14 18.91%) | 24 (32.43%) |

**Note:** Values are presented as n (%). Percentages are based on the total sample (N = 74).

**Opinions about studying in New Zealand**

Table 6 presents opinions on studying a graduate diploma in New Zealand, by gender and nationality. The same number of male and female respondents (sixteen of each gender) had thought before coming to New Zealand that it would be harder to study the graduate diploma in New Zealand than in their home countries. In this group of 32 students, twelve were from India and nine from China. Overall, just under 50% of the respondents had thought that it would be harder to study in New Zealand than in their home country.

**Table 6: Opinions about study difficulty by gender and ethnicity** (N= 74)

| | | Easier than studying in home country | Same as home country | Harder than home country | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Gender** | Male | 10(13.89%) | 14(19.44%) | 16(22.22%) | 40 (55.56%) |
| | Female | 12(16.67%) | 4(5.56%) | 16(22.22%) | 32 (44.44%) |
| **Country** | India | 8(11.11%) | 6(8.33%) | 12(16.67%) | 26 (36.11%) |
| | China | 6(8.33%) | 5(6.94%) | 9(12.50%) | 20 (27.78%) |
| | Brazil | 1(1.35%) | 0(0.00%) | 2(2.78%) | 3 (4.05%) |
| | Others | 7(9.72%) | 7(9.72%) | 9(12.50%) | 23 (31.94%) |

**Note:** Values are presented as n (%). Percentages are based on the total sample (N = 74).

**Further study after completing the course**

The same percentage of male and female respondents (25% of the total number) wanted to study further after completing the graduate diploma course (see Table 7). Students from countries other than India, China and Brazil had the highest number who wanted to go to university for the further studies (thirteen out of 24) and two of the three Brazilian students wanted to continue. On the other hand, fifteen of the 25 Indian students did not want to go for further studies. The main reasons for continuing studies were to keep improving English and other knowledge, to achieve a master's or MBA degree, to get a better job in business, to achieve a higher level of studies to obtain an opportunity



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to undertake PhD studies, to know more about other cultures, to get some experience related to study, to gain some practical knowledge of how to run a business, in case of not getting a work visa, to increase skills in order to obtain citizenship, and to gain international exposure. The students who did not want to go for further studies thought that it was very expensive to study here, that there was not enough time for studying, or already had a job, needed to make money for their families, or had enough skills and were satisfied with their studies. Milad, Rezaei and Vinitha (2018) investigated international students' total experience in the Malaysian higher education sector. They proposed that there were three stages in the international student's total experiences model. The third stage includes the international student's intention to continue with further studies. Statistical results imply that the model explains 65.5% of variances in international students' intentions to continue with further studies.

**Table 7: Opinions about further studies by gender and nationality** (N= 72)

| | | Yes | No | Not sure | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Gender** | Male | 18(25.00%) | 21(29.17%) | 1(1.39%) | 40 (55.55%) |
| | Female | 18(25.00%) | 14(19.44%) | 0(0.00%) | 32 (44.44%) |
| **Country** | India | 10(13.89%) | 15(20.83%) | 0(0.00%) | 25 (34.72%) |
| | China | 11(15.28%) | 8(11.11%) | 1(1.39%) | 20 (27.77%) |
| | Brazil | 2(2.87%) | 1(1.39%) | 0(0.00%) | 3 (4.16%) |
| | Others | 13(18.06%) | 11(15.28%) | 0(0.00%) | 24 (33.33%) |

**Note:** Values are presented as n (%). Percentages are based on the total sample (N = 72).

**Opinions on living costs in New Zealand**

As revealed in Table 8, 75% of the respondents found the living costs in New Zealand higher than they had expected before coming here. It is difficult to live with their wages from twenty hours of work, as the rent, food and transport costs are very high. They also argued about the low wages and the exchange rate for New Zealand currency. There were similar findings in the Malaysian study of assessing policies for attracting international students conducted by Tham et al. (2013). There it was argued that the quality of life and competitive fee structure were significant factors for international students to continue their studies.

**Table 8: Living costs in New Zealand by nationality** (N= 72)

| | | Lower than thought | Same as thought | Higher than thought | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Country | India | 3(4.17%) | 3(4.17%) | 20(27.87%) | 26 (36.11%) |
| | China | 2(2.87%) | 5(6.49%) | 13(18.05%) | 20 (27.78%) |
| | Brazil | 0(0.00%) | 0(0.00%) | 3(4.17%) | 3 (4.17%) |
| | Others | 0(0.00%) | 5(6.49%) | 18(25.00%) | 23 (31.94%) |

**Note:** Values are presented as n (%). Percentages are based on the total sample (N = 72).

**Academic support from institution**

Table 9 shows the expectation and the reality for getting academic support from



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the institute. Among participants, 47.22% felt that they were getting less academic support than they had expected. On the other hand, 40.27% of the students found that they were getting about the degree of support which they had expected. Only 18.5% of Indian students found that they were getting more academic support from the institute than they had expected. However, all three Brazilian students found no gap between their expectations and the reality regarding the academic support. There was a mix of opinions found in this category. Some of the students complained that they did not get any support other than their classes, that they were not satisfied with the school's policies, that they did not get enough information and that there were poor library facilities. On the other hand, some of them felt that they got enough support and feedback from the teachers, and that the administration staff were friendly. They also thought that the institute had professional academic staff who were working very hard.

**Table 9: Academic support from institute, by nationality** (N= 72)

| | | Less than thought | Same as thought | More than thought | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Country | India | 11(15.28%) | 11(15.28%) | 5(6.49%) | 27 (37.50%) |
| | China | 9(12.50%) | 10(13.89%) | 1(1.39%) | 20 (27.78%) |
| | Brazil | 0(0.00%) | 3(4.17%) | 0(0.00%) | 3 (4.17%) |
| | Others | 14(19.44%) | 5(6.49%) | 3(4.17%) | 22 (30.56%) |

**Note:** Values are presented as n (%). Percentages are based on the total sample (N = 72).

**Employment service support from institution**

Table 10 shows that the majority of the students felt that they were getting less employment service support from the institute than they had expected before coming to New Zealand. Among 26 Indian students, 22 of them found that they were getting less employment service support than anticipated. Only 8.69% of the respondents thought that they were getting more employment service support than anticipated. Some of the students mentioned that the institute did not provide any internships, that there were not enough staff in the employment support team, that there was not enough support in finding a job, that the institute just focused on studies, that they only got help with writing a CV and no workshop related to employment. On the other hand, a few of the respondents found that they got help and professional advice from the career service staff and that those staff treated them nicely. Service quality and support have a significant role in a student's life.

**Table 10: Opinions on employment service support from institution by nationality** (N= 69)

| | | Less than thought | Same as thought | More than thought | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Country** | India | 22 (31.88%) | 2 (2.90%) | 2 (2.90%) | 26 (37.68%) |
| | China | 12 (17.39%) | 5 (7.25%) | 1 (1.39%) | 18 (26.09%) |
| | Brazil | 2 (2.90%) | 0 (0.00%) | 1 (1.39%) | 3 (4.13%) |
| | Others | 15 (21.74%) | 5 (7.25%) | 2 (2.90%) | 22 (31.88%) |

**Note:** Values are presented as n (%). Percentages are based on the total sample (N = 69).



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**Long-term plan for studying a graduate diploma in New Zealand**

All students have a long-term plan for studying a graduate diploma course in New Zealand. They want to gain business knowledge, to be familiar with New Zealand culture, to build a professional career in New Zealand, to get permanent residency, to get a full-time work visa, to save money, to gain overseas experience, to get a proper qualification, to continue to further studies; to raise their children here, or to start their own business.

**Ability to achieve objectives after completion of the course**

Table 11 presents the expectations of the students to achieve their objectives after completion of the graduate diploma course, by gender and nationality. As found, 67.5% of male and 60.6% of female respondents expected to be able to achieve their objectives. However, 34.24% of respondents were not sure whether they would be able to achieve their objectives, while only 2.74% felt that they would definitely be unsuccessful. Considering ethnicity, 75% of Chinese respondents were optimistic about achieving their objectives, compared with 70.37% of Indians, and 47.82% of those of other nationalities. The students thought that their previous knowledge, skills and experiences, self-determination, confidence, innovative ideas, hard work, and positive attitude were the points which would help them to achieve their objectives. They also thought the open immigration policy in New Zealand and getting help from friends and from the school might help them to achieve their objectives. On the other hand, some of them found barriers to achieving their objectives, including their lack of work experience in New Zealand, the restricted local job market for foreigners, the low employment rate for overseas students, the lack of support with PR from employers, and their lack of business knowledge.

**Table 11: Achieving objectives, by gender and nationality** (N= 73)

| | | Yes | No | Not sure | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Gender** | Male | 27 (36.99%) | 1 (1.39%) | 12 (16.44%) | 40 (54.79%) |
| | Female | 20 (27.40%) | 0 (0.00%) | 13 (17.81%) | 33 (45.21%) |
| **Country** | India | 19 (26.03%) | 1 (1.39%) | 7 (9.59%) | 27 (36.99%) |
| | China | 15 (20.55%) | 0 (0.00%) | 5 (6.85%) | 20 (27.40%) |
| | Brazil | 2 (2.74%) | 0 (0.00%) | 1 (1.39%) | 3 (4.11%) |
| | Others | 11(15.07%) | 0 (0.00%) | 12 (16.44%) | 23 (31.51%) |

**Note:** Values are presented as n (%). Percentages are based on the total sample (N = 73).

**Is New Zealand a hospitable country to live in?**

As found (Table 12), 92.85% of the respondents thought that New Zealand was a hospitable country to live in. The main reasons were that the people were friendly and kind, the peaceful environment, the lack of crime, equal treatment of the various ethnicities, free medical facilities, government concern about public safety; efficient public services and the beautiful nature.



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**Table 12: Opinions on New Zealand as a hospitable country to live in, by nationality** (N= 56)

| | | Yes | No | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Country** | India | 17 (30.36%) | 0 (0.00%) | 17 (30.36%) |
| | China | 15 (26.79%) | 2 (3.57%) | 17 (30.36%) |
| | Brazil | 2 (3.57%) | 0 (0.00%) | 2 (3.57%) |
| | Others | 18 (32.14%) | 2 (3.57%) | 20 (35.17%) |

**Note:** Values are presented as n (%). Percentages are based on the total sample (N = 56).

**Opinion on recommending future students to study in New Zealand**

The students were asked whether they would recommend future students to study in New Zealand (Table 13). In fact, 80.35% of respondents wanted to recommend their friends and family to study in New Zealand. The reasons for these recommendations were the good culture, global recognition, a good quality of life, a friendly environment, good weather, the lack of crime, safety, and a good education system.

**Table 13: Recommending future students to study in New Zealand by ethnicity** (N= 56)

| | | Yes | No | Not sure | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Country** | India | 13 (23.21%) | 5 (8.93%) | 0 (0.00%) | 18 (32.14%) |
| | China | 13 (23.21%) | 1 (1.79%) | 2 (3.57%) | 16 (28.27%) |
| | Brazil | 2 (3.57%) | 0 (0.00%) | 0 (0.00%) | 2 (3.57%) |
| | Others | 17 (30.36%) | 3 (5.36%) | 0 (0.00%) | 20 (35.71%) |

**Note:** Values are presented as n (%). Percentages are based on the total sample (N = 56).

Only 16.07% of the students said that they would not recommend future students to study in New Zealand. The main reasons they mentioned were that they found New Zealand rather boring, there was nothing exciting here, it was difficult to get job opportunities, and it was hard to get a work visa.

It would be useful to investigate the same issues across different institutions, at various study levels and with diversified nationalities. A comparative study could also be undertaken investigating differences between domestic and international students.

**Discussion**

**1. Safety and PR as major pull factors**

The study found that most important pull factors in selecting New Zealand were safety, and the expectation of gaining remanent residency in near future. Other recent studies also found similar results. Oyedokun et al. (2025) found similar results in a study on Nigerian medical and nursing students. Similarly, Ghundol and Muthanna (2026) also found that Yemeni international students' intention for permanent residency in developed countries. Schäfer (2026) also argued that international students had aspirations for migrations.



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**2. Employment as the largest expectation–reality gap**

This study found that it was harder to get a part-time job than they had expected prior to arrival. There is uncertainty, as opined by majority of respondents, of getting a full-time work after graduation. The reasons are due to lack of local references, employer expectations, and PR dependence. Findings of this study are consistent with the findings of Ibrahim et al. (2026).

**3. Academic and cultural adjustment**

This study found that students experienced difficulties due to language barriers, different education systems, and academic support. Xiang and Lee (2026) also found similar results. They argued that Chinese international students encountered language barriers and cultural challenges during overseas study. Medin et. al (2025) found that international students experienced socio-cultural challenges during their study in Norway.

**4. Institutional support and ethical recruitment**

The study found that international students experienced gaps in expectations and reality. Therefore, education providers should organize realistic pre-arrival briefings about opportunities and challenges of job, permanent residency, living costs, and academic expectations. They should provide students with adequate information through structured orientation on New Zealand academic culture and requirements. Similarly, they should offer stronger English and academic writing support. Also, they need to develop internship and employer-linkage programs for students to facilitate their employability. Furthermore, they should strengthen career services beyond CV writing. These services may include the development of job search skills, understanding job application requirement and process, and interview skills to enhance students' employability. Mai et al. (2025) also argued that institutional support was crucial for international students' satisfaction.

**5. The contradiction between satisfaction and disappointment**

A very interesting finding is that many students experienced difficulties but still viewed New Zealand as hospitable and would recommend it. This study argues that students found positive pull-factors such as friendly people, peaceful and good natural environment, safety, law abiding people, opportunity to improve English (less cost), opportunities to mix with individuals and learn local culture, and good governance.

## Conclusion

The findings reveal that international students choose New Zealand as a destination because they believe that the country has a safe and peaceful environment, offers a high possibility of permanent residency after study, and has a well-reputed education system. Most of them want to apply for residency after finishing their studies. They generally have experienced difficulty in finding a job, which contradicts their prior



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expectations. They have mentioned that the employers require a higher level of English ability than they had anticipated, that they cannot supply adequate references, and that they experience invisible discrimination. They also have commented that, although they are permitted to work for twenty hours per week while studying, that is not sufficient to cover the cost of their living expenses. They find rent, transport and food expensive in New Zealand. They also find that study is harder than in their home countries because of the language barrier, cultural differences and a different education system. They expect more academic and employment services from the institute, but most of the students would still recommend future students to study in New Zealand.

The study shows that international students' expectations of New Zealand are shaped not only by education quality but also by employment and migration aspirations. The largest gaps emerged in employment support, living costs, permanent residency expectations, and academic adjustment. These findings suggest that international education providers have a responsibility to provide clearer pre-arrival information and more structured post-arrival support.

The study has some implications. For education providers, provide realistic pre-arrival briefings about work, PR, living costs, and academic expectations. Offer structured orientation on New Zealand academic culture. Provide stronger English and academic writing support. Develop internship and employer-linkage programs. Strengthen career services beyond CV writing.

Similarly, for policymakers, monitor whether international students receive accurate information before enrolment. Strengthen transparency around post-study work and migration pathways. Review whether PTEs provide adequate pastoral, academic, and employment support. Finally, for students, conduct careful pre-arrival research. Prepare financially for high living costs. Understand that study does not automatically lead to PR or employment.

There are some limitations in this study. The study involved only one PTE. The sample size was small. Some subgroups were very small. The study relied on self-reported perceptions. Expectations were recalled retrospectively, so recall bias is possible. The data may have been affected by changes in New Zealand immigration and labour-market policies. The findings should not be generalized to all international students in New Zealand.***

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