



Commentary

Chinese Students Overseas Educational Experiences: An Assessment of Service Quality in New Zealand

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Received date: 24 December, 2021, Manuscript No: er-22-55064;
Editor assigned date: 27 December, 2021; PreQC No. er-22-55064(PQ);
Reviewed date: 07 January, 2022; QC No er-22-55064;
Revised date: 17 January, 2022, Manuscript No. er-22-55064(R);
Published date: 24 January, 2022, DOI: 10.14303/2141-5161.2022.230.

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INTRODUCTION

During the past decade, tertiary education providers in the English-speaking western world have enjoyed the significant economic and societal benefits that result from a substantial level of participation by students originating from the people's republic of china. However, a sharp decline in student numbers between 2003 and 2007 has prompted many institutions to question the extent to which their educational products and services are appropriate to the needs of this important market segment. This paper examines the experiences of 160 Chinese students at a New Zealand tertiary institution, and concludes that their impressions of quality are formed by a range of contributing service dimensions that incorporate both 'hard' and 'soft' elements. Analysis of the scope, scale and importance of these dimensions indicates that, while programme content and tuition quality remain vitally important to Chinese students, institutional performance could benefit from a greater degree of emphasis on the students' interpersonal experiences while studying abroad.

EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES AND STUDY PATHWAYS

The study plans of most of the participants related to gaining a bachelor or higher degree in New Zealand. Many hoped to stay on in New Zealand to work or apply for residence. Others hoped that an overseas qualification would help them secure employment in the PRC. Study

plans for most of the participants required adjustment after arrival. The majority of the students required English language study to fulfill the IELTS requirements to enter universities and polytechnics. Many of the students underestimated the time it would take to acquire the appropriate level of English; therefore they spent a much longer period of time in language schools than they had anticipated. This was a significant source of frustration for the students. Students offered a range of opinions about their experiences of the different educational sectors they came in contact with – high schools, language schools and tertiary institutions.

Most reported being satisfied with the learning environment, in particular the quality of teaching and the approachability of teaching staff, together with the focus on independent learning and students being encouraged to ask questions. However, students also talked about some of the problems they encountered with the education system here, for example difficulty in attaining adequate English language skills; participating in classroom discussions; working on group projects or assignments that required them to make oral presentations.

LIFE SATISFACTION AND CHALLENGES

Some of the issues most challenging to the Chinese international students in their first three months of arrival were the language barrier, loneliness and difficulties

Citation: Samson K (2022) Chinese Students Overseas Educational Experiences: An Assessment of Service Quality in New Zealand. *Educ.Res* 13:1.

encountered with their homestay accommodation. Before coming to New Zealand the participants had anticipated greater personal freedom, especially as they would no longer be under direct parental supervision and control. However, the reality of the situation revealed that students experienced loneliness and hardship, and they also found they could not always count on their parents for help. Maintaining a relationship with parents and family in China while living in New Zealand also presented many students with a challenge. While some students reported establishing a closer relationship with parents since arriving here, others detailed a widening gap and lack of contact with family. Many of these students believed that their parents did not understand the problems they encountered here and were reluctant to discuss situations with them. Social support networks in New Zealand are significantly different for Chinese international students. They tend to rely on co-nationals or relatives for support and display reluctance seeking help from formal sources of support. Not surprisingly, the quality of homestay accommodation impacted on the students' satisfaction levels. Some students' detailed examples of hosts making them feel unwelcome and only interested in having them in the household because of the income they provided, while others spoke of hosts helping them with their studies and

language skills and including them in family activities.

In general, most participants felt more satisfied with life in New Zealand at the time of interview compared to when they first arrived. Of those who were less satisfied, many detailed anxiety about future plans, especially in relation to finding suitable employment either in New Zealand or the PRC. Two-thirds of participants who expressed dissatisfaction with New Zealand both at the time of arrival and when they were interviewed admitted that New Zealand had not been their first choice when it came to a study destination. Students who said life was better at the time of interview compared to when they first arrived in New Zealand attributed this change in attitude to doing well in their studies, making friends, enjoying the relaxed lifestyle New Zealand offers, and appreciating the opportunity to study overseas. Interaction with domestic students was very limited. Many students spoke of their aspirations prior to arrival in New Zealand of getting to know "Kiwis". In reality this seldom happened and the students tended to socialise, on and off campus, with other Chinese. Many students believed domestic students were not interested in getting to know international students, although there was an appreciation by some of the participants that making friends required input, tolerance and understanding from all sides.