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NZ holds fast

A continued decrease in Chinese student numbers means New Zealand higher education institutions still operate in the shadow of the 2003/2004 gold rush. However, an increase in first-time visa applicants and a clever positioning of new niche programmes for various markets gives hope to NZ educators that their tenacity will pay off. **BETHAN NORRIS** reports.

The New Zealand international education market has not been performing particularly well of late, although recent statistics show that this situation could soon be about to change. Current statistics produced by Education New Zealand show that the number of first-time student visa applicants grew by 20 per cent between 2005/2006 and 2006/2007, while the total number of visa approvals for all sectors increased by just under one per cent over the same period.

This spells good news for international education providers across all sectors in an industry that has seen total student visa approvals fall by 16 per cent from a peak in 2003/2004. The higher education sector has been particularly badly hit in the past three years, with student visa approvals for this sector falling by 23 per cent between 2004 and 2007.

Wayne Angus, Manager of International Marketing and Liaison at the University of Otago in Dunedin, says that they have experienced "a general downward trend" in international enrolments since 2006. "This has largely been driven by a pronounced fall-off in enrolments from China," he says. "Outside of China, enrolments have been stable or have increased. The tremendous growth in students from China from 2000 onwards was largely driven by New Zealand's more flexible visa requirements than other countries. But, by 2004, that advantage no longer existed."

"The growth was largely driven by New Zealand's more flexible visa requirements, but by 2004, that advantage no longer existed"

All sectors of New Zealand's international education industry have relied heavily on the Chinese market in recent years and while the number of Chinese students in the country has been decreasing, this market still makes up a sizeable part of the international student body in many institutions. According to Angus, Chinese students still make up the largest student nationality at the university, although other nationalities have been increasing steadily. "The USA also provides high numbers – principally for study abroad programmes," he says. "Followed by Malaysia, Germany, Korea and Japan."

Christine Wright, International Centre Manager at the Eastern Institute of Technology (EIT) in Taradale, says that international enrolments at their institutions have grown over the past 12 months, mainly due to the growing importance of a relatively new student market. "Indians are now our largest nationality at EIT," she says. "There is strong demand from students who wish to gain a vocational qualification so they can get a job after graduation and then apply for permanent residence."

Gaining permanent residence in New Zealand is the motivating factor behind many international students' decisions to study in the country and the recent policy change to allow international students to work for 12 months after completing their degree is encouraging this motivation (see ETM, Jan 08). Other recent initiatives to reverse the decline in Chinese students may also have an effect on enrolment numbers too. A Free Trade Agreement between New Zealand and China signed in April this year commits the New Zealand government to provide a decision to Chinese students on their visa applications within 10 working days, while an initiative introduced last December enables students from Beijing to use a remittance bank account that will be accepted by Immigration New Zealand as proof of an applicant's ability to support themselves while studying in New Zealand.

Sylvia-Ann Tahuriorangi, International Student Advisor at Waiariki Institute in Rotorua, says that they are starting to bounce back from the decrease in international students experienced with the decline of the Chinese market. "In 2007, Waiariki International student numbers increased, due to a stronger focus on marketing strategies," she comments, adding, "This is expected to continue in 2008 and beyond."

Waiariki Institute currently enrolls students from 25 different nationalities, although it has also introduced a new programme to cater for the important Chinese market. "We have [introduced] a specific English programme to Chinese teachers of English, as a pilot scheme, which worked very well, and which has now opened pathways for new Chinese teachers of English to come to Waiariki Institute," says Tahuriorangi.

Adapting courses to cater specifically for some of the biggest international student markets has also worked well for the Eastern Institute of Technology. "EIT has made some slight modifications to our culinary arts programme to be more attractive to the Indian market," explains Wright, adding, "International students are enrolling on a broad spectrum of programmes, including Business and computing, Wine science, Nursing, Hospitality and Horticulture."

Ensuring that courses are relevant to particular markets is one way to ensure future growth in international enrolments, as is the development of collaborative programmes with institutions overseas. Wright says that they expect to see international enrolments increase "albeit slowly" over the next few years due to their efforts in this latter area too. "We hope to see students coming to study at EIT out of the relationships we are developing with institutions offshore – India and China – in Business and Wine science."

Angus at the University of Otago also points to cross-border relationships with other institutions as part of their marketing efforts for the future, and adds that he expects course trends to change in the future. "There will be an increasing demand for short-term overseas study experiences, whether as part of formal exchange programmes or through fee-paying study," he speculates, noting that any change in course requirements will also be filtered through agencies. "Given that New Zealand has limited representative office presence overseas for education promotion, we are very dependent on the contribution of education agents." ■

Top student nationalities in New Zealand higher education, 2007

