

PERSPECTIVES ON INTERNATIONAL STUDENT POLICY AND DOCTORAL STUDENT EXPERIENCES IN AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND

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ABSTRACT

In Aotearoa New Zealand, international students constitute a special migrant class at the nexus of tertiary education and migration neo-liberalisation. Unlike temporary labour migrants, international students are consumers who pay fees to tertiary institutions for a qualification. Yet, compared to their domestic peers, they face unique challenges of bearing a greater financial burden, often struggling with social inclusion, and facing barriers to stable postgraduate employment. We argue that this unique position of international students requires special obligations from the government. This article combines policy research into Aotearoa New Zealand's international student policy context with an autoethnography of the authors' experiences as international and domestic students. We recommend policy adjustments to address international student needs before, during, and after their studies.

KEY WORDS

International Students, Immigration Policy, Social Inclusion, New Zealand

Introduction

Amid global economic uncertainty and rising anti-immigrant sentiment, Aotearoa New Zealand has taken a distinct approach by aiming to double its international student numbers by 2034 (Lu, 2025). This policy shift, however, is framed almost exclusively in economic terms—focused on boosting the tertiary sector's financial contribution to the national economy ((Lu, 2025). The plan includes increased overseas marketing and enhanced student benefits, such as raising the weekly work limit from 20 to 25 hours and extending post-study visa options. While these changes have been welcomed by some, past “goldrush” approaches to international education have led to exploitation (Arr et al., 2024).

This article examines New Zealand's international student policy settings and shares the lived experiences of two female international doctoral students. Their stories highlight the human realities behind the economic narrative and underscore the need for more supportive policies if the government's goals are to be met. The article concludes with reflections for policymakers and practitioners working in this space.

Policy Context and Literature Review

New Zealand's engagement with international students began with the Colombo Plan in 1951, initially framed as a diplomatic and aid initiative. Over time, the number of privately funded students grew, although tertiary education remained largely government-funded until the 1980s. A significant shift occurred

with the Education Act 1989 (now part of the Education and Training Act 2020), which redefined tertiary education as a private good (Chiou, 2017). Under current legislation, institutions can set their own fees, requiring international students to pay full-cost recovery rates. As government funding declined, universities became increasingly reliant on international student fees, a vulnerability exposed during the COVID-19 pandemic when student numbers dropped sharply (Gerritsen, 2025).

This neoliberal transformation positioned international education as a commercial industry. Strategic oversight and regulation have increased, notably through the International Education Strategy 2022–2030 and the Education (Pastoral Care of Tertiary and International Learners) Code of Practice 2021. Only approved signatories can enrol international students. Education New Zealand, established in 2011, promotes the country as a global education destination. This commercial focus has also influenced aid spending, with more funds directed toward tertiary rather than primary education (Spratt & Wood, 2018).

Immigration policy further reinforces the economic framing of international students. Visa categories offer varying work rights based on course type, duration, and provider. Post-study work visas link eligibility to income and qualification level. While initial liberalisation aimed to attract students, subsequent reforms have sought to improve the perceived quality of migrants, such as restricting work rights for non-degree holders (Chiou, 2017).

New Zealand's approach to immigration policy mirrors trends in other Anglophone countries like Canada, Australia, and the UK (Roy & Collins, 2025). The neoliberal model treats migrants as economic units and tertiary education as a private commodity. Institutions and governments seek international students for their financial contributions during and after study (Coustere et al., 2024). However, students in below-degree programmes are especially vulnerable to policy shifts aimed at reducing migrant numbers or enhancing quality, resulting in visa churn and precarity (Sabzalieva et al., 2022). Labour market challenges—such as employer prejudice, acculturation stress, and limited networks—exacerbate this vulnerability, even under ostensibly welcoming visa regimes (Eulatth Vidal & Kamp, 2024).

International Doctoral Student Experiences

To examine this precarity, the article uses autoethnography for two of the co-authors to explore the lived experiences of migrant doctoral students. Autoethnography enables researchers to reflect on personal experiences within broader socio-political contexts (Wu, et al, 2025). The narratives of Sandesha and Yixin, both international doctoral students, serve as lenses into the complexities of migration, education, and personal transformation (Hou, Li & Mushfiq, 2025). As "insiders," they recount their journeys through visa processes, arrival, orientation, housing, employment, childcare, spousal responsibilities, and academic pressures.

Sandesha

As a migrant from Sri Lanka, this is my first experience away from home as an international student. Even though I was elated about getting admission to a world-renowned university, the immigration process made it so disheartening. Even with all the necessary funds available, it was a lengthy and hectic process. I almost had to defer my programme to the next round as the visa did not arrive on time, taking more than a month to process. Knowing the process, I only applied for a visa, thinking it would speed up the process; unfortunately, there was no change. That led to my separation from my 1.5-year-old baby and husband for 6 months after I arrived in New Zealand, as I was still waiting for their visas to be processed. It was a hard time emotionally while navigating an unknown land all alone.

The university academic process was smooth, with all the necessary information available through the support systems. As an international student, finding part-time jobs was pretty hard. I had to send about 50 CVs before landing a job at the university, which was very fortunate. So, once I moved here, I lived with a Sri Lankan family and looked for apartments for my family to settle in once they arrived. That was quite a quest as they all required referees, and most importantly, the rent was unbearably high for a student family. Then I applied for university family accommodation, and it was offered to me, loosening a huge burden from my back which was covered through my scholarship. The part that the university plays is splendid and praiseworthy. External factors, such as financial and economic pressures, make the journey as an international student difficult.

On top of everything, the family pressure was there despite my academic and professional commitments. As a mother and a wife, I was responsible for taking care of my family and the overarching guilt of not being able to provide the best for my family as they moved to New Zealand for me. After spending months searching for job opportunities, my husband finally landed a job hundreds of kilometres away from where we live. To ease my guilt and do the best for him, he accepted the offer and moved there for work, which left me and my baby to navigate the unknown land alone, which can impact one both mentally and physically in the long term.

Yixin

As an international student from China, I arrived in New Zealand about 2 years ago to commence my first overseas study. Due to the requirement of undergoing a national security check, the visa application process took nearly 2 months, which caused me anxiety and stress during that period. Fortunately, I could obtain my visa before the expected registration date and successfully arrived in New Zealand as planned. For most international students who grew up in China and come to study abroad for the first time, the unfamiliar language environment and different cultural context often constitute the most significant challenges.

Although I achieved satisfactory results in language proficiency examinations, my long-term residence in China gave me few opportunities to speak English. Consequently, upon arrival, I frequently encountered difficulties in daily life—such as shopping, seeking accommodation, and accessing medical care—due to challenges in communication. As a result, most of the first 3 months were spent with other Chinese PhD students in similar circumstances. It was reassuring that, after participating in various workshops and social connection activities organised by the university, I gradually became accustomed to the multicultural environment in New Zealand.

Meanwhile, although I was fortunate to receive a scholarship from the Chinese government, the difference in price level compared to China meant that daily costs needed to be reduced as much as possible. With my supervisors' support, I obtained some teaching assistant jobs to supplement my living expenses. However, for other students without scholarships, financial support from family is essential, and they often must make additional efforts to seek part-time employment at the university to alleviate their financial burden.

Some of us also hope these working experiences will enrich our CVs and better prepare us for obtaining academic positions after graduation. Compared to local students, international PhD graduates often face additional challenges in obtaining academic positions in New Zealand, such as limited access to professional networks and fewer opportunities to build connections within the local educational community. Compounding these challenges are visa and work permit restrictions and unfamiliarity with the New Zealand higher education system and its expectations.

Analysis

Sandesha and Yixin's experiences illustrate how international students are embedded in a migration-education nexus that values them for their economic potential. Their stories reveal both shared and distinct challenges shaped by policy and personal circumstances (Eulath Vidal & Kamp, 2024). The pre-arrival visa process is exhausting for international students, particularly those travelling with family. Students are assumed

to be self-sufficient economic migrants rather than learners, a difficulty aggravated during the study by limited work conditions. What undergirds this is an apparent assumption that extended family will fill in to support students during these years, ignoring the lived realities of many international students. Visa fees coupled with annual renewal requirements, even while undertaking three-year doctoral study, only adds to this burden.

The challenges faced upon arrival in New Zealand reveal structural and policy shortcomings in the management of international student migration. Limited practical English and unfamiliarity with local systems not only hinder daily functioning but also reflect insufficient preparatory support for linguistic and cultural adaptation. In addition, while social inclusion is included in the pastoral care code, is not adequately executed, as there are no bridging connections between domestic and international students. It is mainly international students who bond with each other while navigating their new life. The reliance on fellow international students for social integration exposes the inadequacy of institutional mechanisms to foster meaningful engagement with domestic peers, which may reinforce social segmentation.

Furthermore, higher education neo-liberalization is a common thread in the positioning of international students as "temporary migrants" or "consumers". Financial pressures, even among scholarship recipients, highlight systemic gaps in cost-of-living and income support, illustrating how economic barriers are embedded in the student migration model. Furthermore, restricted access to local academic networks and unclear guidance on career pathways demonstrate that current higher education policies position international students primarily as consumers, valuing their contribution to the system while providing insufficient institutional scaffolding, thereby exacerbating inequities and limiting long-term integration and professional development.

These challenges reflect broader immigration trends that tie mobility to economic productivity. Such policies create practical difficulties—financial, logistical, and emotional—that compound social and cultural stressors. Yixin faced acculturation stress due to language barriers and limited social networks but found support among fellow Chinese PhD students and university services. Sandesha's primary stressor was familial: balancing academic responsibilities with her roles as wife and mother. Visa and financial constraints intensified her feelings of guilt over unmet responsibilities, despite circumstances beyond her control.

Their experiences underscore the multifaceted nature of international student precarity. While policy frameworks shape the conditions of their lives, individual responses vary, revealing diverse strategies and resilience. These narratives highlight the need for more compassionate and inclusive policy approaches that recognise international students not just as economic contributors but as whole individuals navigating complex transitions.

Conclusion

This article has outlined Aotearoa New Zealand's international student policy settings, including proposed changes. As is often the case, policy decisions can respond crudely to urgent needs. International students remain framed as economic assets rather than individuals—often with families—seeking connection and belonging. Yet, a nation is more than its GDP. Aotearoa's traditions of social democracy and collective values, including those rooted in Māori culture, are not always reflected in current policy, which leans toward individualism and wealth generation.

The student narratives in this article highlight the need for greater investment in university support systems to help international students navigate their early challenges. For the government's goals to succeed, students must be engaged not just as revenue sources but as partners in shaping policies that foster their success and wellbeing.

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