

## Once Returned, Twice Forgotten? Asian Students Returning Home After Studying in New Zealand

ANDREW BUTCHER  
TERRY MCGRATH  
PAUL STOCK\*

### Abstract

An important and often under-recognised group of returned migrants for New Zealand are Asian students who have studied in New Zealand. These students either return to their countries of origin in Asia or migrate elsewhere. We need to consider these Asian students within New Zealand's broader engagement with Asia, rather than within the relatively narrower confines of educational marketing or psychological experiences that they are more often discussed. Based on research undertaken for the Asia New Zealand Foundation, this paper summarises the data and research on Asian students in New Zealand before commenting on the importance of these returning students on New Zealand-Asia relationships long-term.

The New Zealand government has invested a significant amount of funding into the recruitment of international students, the professional development of those that work with international students and research into the experiences of international students in New Zealand. However, relatively little research has been undertaken on the experiences and implications of international students returning to their countries of origin. This paper considers Asian students within international relations more broadly. Attention is focussed on how Asian

---

\* Dr Andrew Butcher is Director of Research in the Asia New Zealand Foundation. Terry McGrath is National Director, International Student Ministries, New Zealand and Vice-President (Research), ISANA (International Education Association) New Zealand and Paul Stock is Senior Tutor in Plant and Cell Biology, Massey University. This is an edited version of an invited paper presented at the 12<sup>th</sup> International Metropolis Conference, Melbourne, Australia, 8-12 October 2007. It draws heavily on material contained in McGrath *et al* (2007) *Friends and Allies: The Impact of Returning Asian Students on NZ-Asia relationships*, Asia New Zealand Foundation, Wellington. Email address Dr Butcher: [abutcher@asianz.org.nz](mailto:abutcher@asianz.org.nz)

students, who have studied in New Zealand and have returned to Asia, could be nurtured, maintained and developed as friends and allies to New Zealand longer term.

Despite decades of Asian immigration and Asian students, New Zealanders' "Asian literacy" is poor. New Zealanders need to find ways to draw on the skills of Asian students to sharpen their knowledge of Asia. At the same time, we need to find ways to provide greater opportunities for our new Asian Kiwis to become "New Zealand literate" so they can make an effective contribution to the country as well as enjoy life in New Zealand to the fullest. Moreover, "New Zealand literate" Asian students can effectively promote New Zealand overseas.

There are already important linkages via returned students into the Asian region. Alumni networks build on existing connections and advance educational links. There are also person-to-person networks, computer-mediated communities, religious networks and other more informal networks between returned Asian students. All of these networks maintain important connections amongst New Zealand's alumni in the Asian region. Strategically, there are important issues to consider around ongoing engagement between these returned Asian students and the further development of industry, politics and education in New Zealand. At a people-to-people level, the types of communities that returned Asian students establish and the success they have in entering the labour market are salient issues. There are also significant implications for New Zealand to consider: do these returned Asian students use their New Zealand study experiences to maintain and build linkages with New Zealand and are businesses, government agencies and the education system utilising these students as effectively as they could?

While more international students are choosing to and being encouraged to remain in New Zealand, the great majority still return to their countries of origin. Given that most international students to New Zealand continue to come from countries in Asia and return back to these countries, this paper addresses the question: "What is the impact of returning Asian students on NZ-Asia relationships"?

## A Brief History of Asian Students in New Zealand

Students from Asia first came to New Zealand under the Colombo Plan in the 1950s, ostensibly as a form of educational aid somewhat aligned with New Zealand's foreign policy. As a publication at the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Colombo Plan identified, "today, in New Zealand at least the Colombo Plan is remembered mainly as a plan for bringing Asian students to New Zealand rather than as a wide-ranging effort to support the development of Asian countries" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2001).

Alongside the Colombo Plan students, and eventually outnumbering them, was a cohort of private fee paying students. These private students were generally from the same countries as the Colombo Plan students; they paid their own way in a subsidised environment. The largest single group were Malaysian-Chinese largely unable to find places in local universities because of Malaysia's *bumiputra* policy (a policy that positively discriminates toward Malay students being offered places at universities). During this era, many New Zealanders involved in tertiary education came into contact with these Asian students. Many of the Asian students who studied in New Zealand during this period appreciated the social and educational opportunities they were given. Their experiences in New Zealand were genuinely life changing and set them on a path to influence in their home countries.

The Colombo Plan era ultimately drew to a close in the 1980s. Changes in foreign policy priorities, aid objectives and educational philosophy in that decade brought about changes toward open market policies and selling New Zealand education to international students at full cost for tuition and services (for a fuller discussion of New Zealand's changing policy toward international students, see Tarling 2004). Under open market policies, the bulk of new international students came from Asia and by the end of the 1990's, increasing numbers were coming from the People's Republic of China (PRC).

The importance of learning English, globalisation trends and desires for cost efficient, high quality Western style education appeared to be the motivating factors for those coming from China and elsewhere. Even though there was a dominance of students from China, there was also a greater diversity among international students, extending beyond Asia to other parts of the world, including the United States, the Arab world and

Europe. With the end of the Colombo Plan and education-as-aid, the full-fee paying Asian students that came to New Zealand became important for new reasons, in particular as an earner of export revenue.

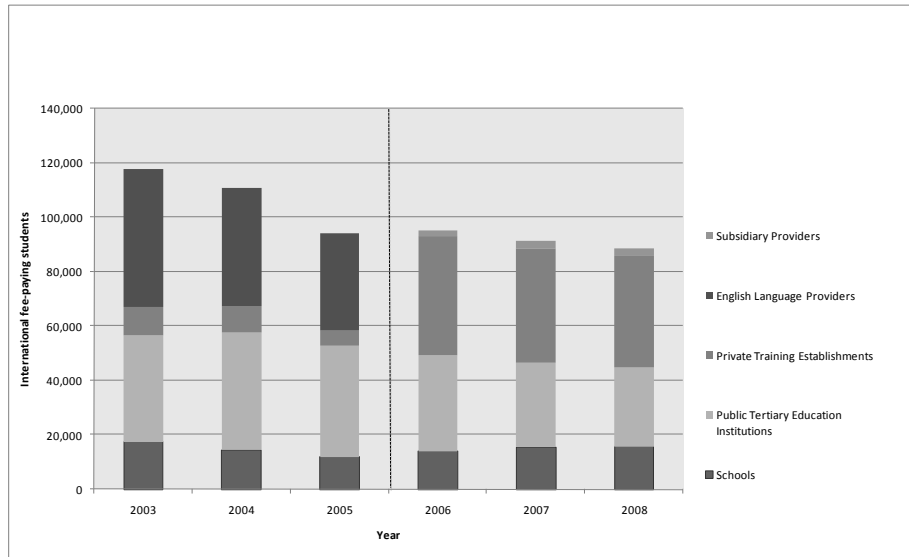
### ***Growing Pains: The Asian Student as a New Zealand Export Earner***

“The Government has reversed its longstanding opposition to high fees for overseas students in a bid to earn export income from New Zealand’s education services”, proclaimed the *New Zealand Herald* on 27 December 1988, in relation to the soon to be enacted legislation that would allow New Zealand educational institutions to sell places to overseas students for profit. This change was to significantly impact upon Asian students.

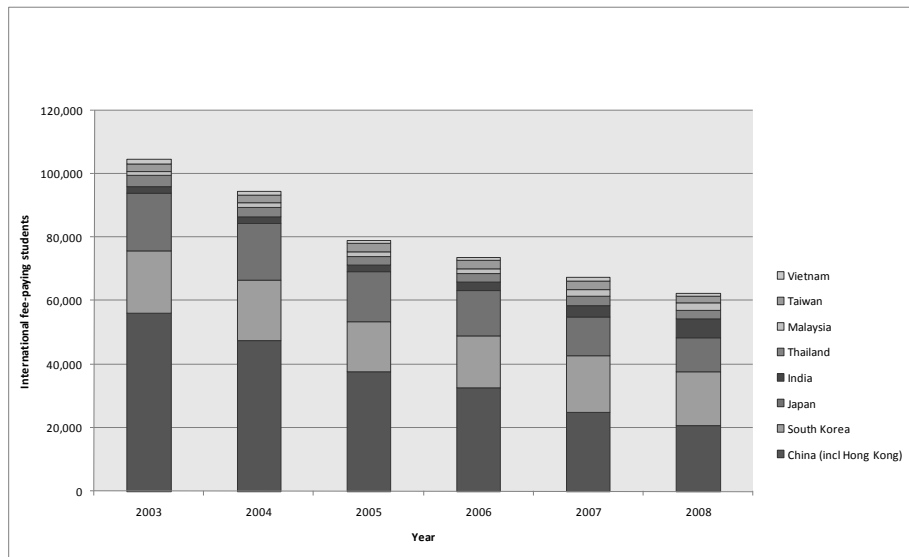
Initially, numbers of international students to New Zealand reduced as the cost of education in the country became less attractive to families from South East Asia struggling to afford study and for whom the subsidised study of previous years had been attractive. However, along with the lifting of the subsidy came a lifting of the limits on numbers of places and the countries from which students could be drawn from. Initially, there was an upper limit imposed on the numbers of students from China. The overall effect was that international student numbers dipped in the early 1990s, especially from Asia, but began increasing through the mid 1990s, rising rapidly in the early 2000s before falling again gradually from a peak in 2004 (Figures 1 & 2).

In the open market, international students increasingly represented both income for public education institutions and the opportunities for consolidation of profit for many private education providers. During the decade of 1994-2004, both growth in roll numbers and the size of the education sector adapted to cater for the increasing inflow of students. Most export education marketing focussed on Asia, where there was perceived significant opportunity. China, in particular, along with Japan and the Republic of Korea (South Korea), became very important markets and a flood of students came in to learn English and to gain a tertiary education in New Zealand. Primary and secondary schools entered the market and total numbers of international students peaked at a little over 120,000 in 2003-4, compared to barely 5000 ten years earlier.

**Figure 1: Enrolments of international students in New Zealand by provider groups**



**Figure 2: Enrolments of international students in New Zealand by country**

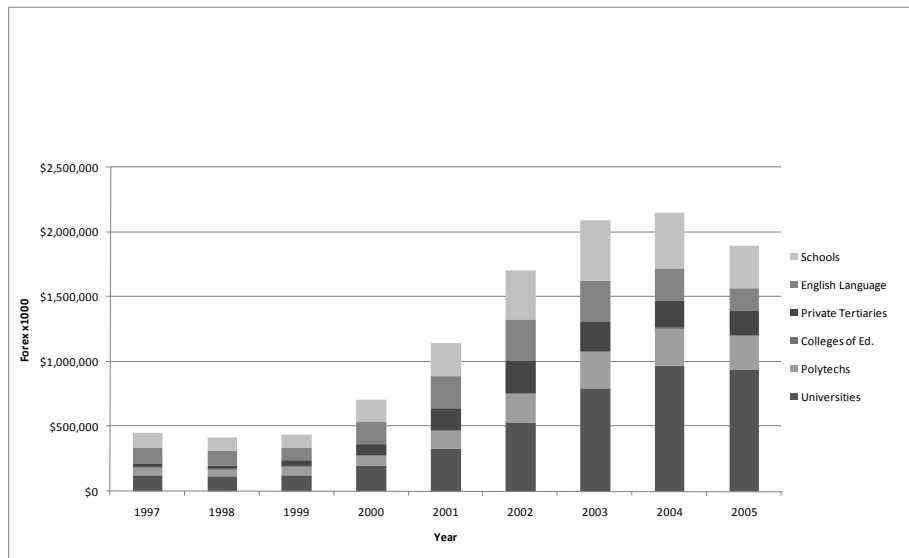


The proportion of Asian students rose to around 87 percent of the international student body during this period and while numbers of students from other regions also increased, they did so at a more modest rate.

### Asian Students and the New Zealand Host Communities

The increase in Asian students to New Zealand clearly had economic benefits. However, what quickly became apparent was that host communities were not necessarily prepared for the subsequent demographic changes in their neighbourhoods. In New Zealand, as the number of Asian students rose rapidly, the host communities became more aware of them. Host communities frequently provided goods and services such as accommodation, food, transport, recreation, entertainment along with the provision of education and its attendant services such as libraries, bookshops, teachers, and computers. The economic benefits of providing goods and services to international students became quite clear quite quickly. Estimates of the overall economic benefit to New Zealand by education sector are shown in Figure 3.

**Figure 3: Economic benefits of export education in New Zealand**



Source: Education New Zealand Statistics

In 2003, the economic benefit was estimated to be \$2.09 billion and in 2004, \$2.15 with over 40 percent of that coming from China. A further 40 percent came from the export of education services to other parts of Asia. New Zealand's export education industry had very significant links into Asia and had become an industry in its own right in New Zealand by the early 2000s.

The rapidly increasing numbers of Asian students through to 2004 coincided with increased Asian immigration, which was due, in part, to favourable changes in immigration policies toward non-Western countries after 1986. These policy changes also included allowing international students to work whilst studying and favouring them for longer-term migration on the completion of their studies. This combination effectively put a lot more Asian faces into the New Zealand host community, whether the host community was prepared for this shift toward a more diverse population or not.

Incidents of racial discrimination reported by Asian students tended to have greater impact on them than the positive attitudes and friendships they encountered (McGrath & Butcher 2004). Portrayals in the media of Asian students also added to host community views (Spoonley & Trlin 2004). Media reports tended to identify Asian students as being responsible for health problems, crime and as visa abusers (Rotherham 2003). High public exposure of negative incidents tended to magnify the influence on host community perceptions.

Interactions between Asian student communities and New Zealand's host communities extended beyond New Zealand's dominant Pākehā/European majority culture. Asian students – and, historically, Asian migrants generally – interacted in significant ways with New Zealand's Māori population, although “[a]mong the recent chorus of shrill anti-Asian voices are some eminent Māori protagonists” (Ip 2009:2). There are also parallels between New Zealand's Asian and Pacific migrant (and also local-born) populations: they both involve a level of return migration and migration onwards to other countries and both populations, because of their growing numbers and demographic strength, are becoming significant to New Zealand's future (Didham & Bedford 2004). So while there was somewhat limited interaction between Asian students and Māori and Pacific populations in the early years of educating Asians in New Zealand (a result, amongst other things, of geography and socioeconomic status),

demographic realities will ensure that there will be increased interactions between these population groups going forward.

Until the late 1990s, New Zealand's export education industry was largely unregulated. From 1999, however, a mandatory *Code of Practice for the Pastoral Care of International Students*, and relying on quality assurance, such as NZQA audits, were the main tools used as the means of assuring both care of students and quality systems in delivering education (Butcher 2004). However, little or no attempt was made to consider the effects on and of large numbers of Asian students entering education in New Zealand (Butcher 2003).

In four substantive reports by the then Tertiary Education Advisory Commission (subsequently the Tertiary Education Commission) addressing future directions in New Zealand tertiary education, international students received one fleeting reference, yet at the time they accounted for almost eight percent of the student body and their numbers were rising. Successive reports on the internationalisation of education have generally been largely ignored in relation to the opportunity afforded for building international relationships (see, for example, Back *et al.* 1998 and McInnis *et al.* 2006). 'Internationalisation' has largely been viewed within narrow terms and not with reference to broader issues of international relations long-term.

### ***Asian Students' Views of New Zealand Culture***

The decade of growth for international education in New Zealand brought with it changes in the New Zealand environment for Asian students coming to study here. Frequently, Asian students encountered large numbers of other Asian students and, for many, much of their adjustment and socialisation occurred amongst co-nationals and other international students. Many Asian students reported limited opportunities to engage with New Zealand domestic students and with the host communities. Research shows that international students and Asian students in particular felt that the education they received here was of a generally good standard and that accommodation and living were generally good but a little more costly than the students would like (McGrath & Butcher 2004; Ward & Masgoret 2004; Ho *et al.* 2007).

Asian students readily report that New Zealanders are superficially friendly but somewhat reticent to engage in quality relationships (Ward &

Masgoret 2004). There are exceptions and these frequently relate to quality home-stay experiences and deep lasting friendships with some domestic students but the majority of Asian students return home having not achieved a level of engagement with the host community or New Zealand student peers that they would have liked. Some Asian students have received negative messages such as racist remarks, financial exploitation or poor treatment by service providers.

Research on returning students showed the most frequently encountered problems returned Asian students identified in New Zealand were transport and communication. New Zealand's poor transport infrastructure and the struggles to communicate well in English, along with experiencing cultural distance and being unable to make New Zealand friends, were also the leading problems encountered by international students who participated in a national survey in New Zealand in 2004 (Ward & Masgoret 2004). Asian students were less likely to maintain friendships with New Zealanders once they returned home if they had not developed those friendships in the first instance. The task of developing those friendships falls to Asian students as much, if not more, to New Zealand students; and to the institutions where Asian students study.

Research also illustrates that many Asian students ended their time in New Zealand with a desire to stay on but the lack of employment opportunities and the pull of home and family mitigated that desire (Department of Labour 2006). Approximately four-fifths of Asian students who study in New Zealand return to Asia. However, there are an increasing number of international students remaining in New Zealand after completing their studies. New Zealand's Department of Labour reports that 17 percent of students granted their permit between 1997/98 and 2005/06 had gained permanent residence by June 2006, although this figure is lessened by the inclusion of the most recent cohorts (where migrants have had less time in New Zealand). If sufficient time is allowed, approximately 20 percent of international students gain permanent residence in New Zealand. This trend may be seen in part as due to the desire to stay on and to immigration policies that favour New Zealand trained graduates. As Asian graduates who return to Asia are a great resource, so are those graduates who remain in New Zealand: together, Asian students who return or stay are invaluable in building relationships between the countries of Asia and New Zealand.

During their time in New Zealand many Asian students formed friendships with their peers. Frequently, these friendships and networks were maintained after graduation and developed into successful business and community service relationships. Research shows that amongst recent Asian students studying in New Zealand, their friendships are more likely to be made amongst co-nationals and other internationals rather than with local domestic students and other New Zealanders (Ward & Masgoret 2004). At re-entry, many of these Asian students regretted that they did not engage more with New Zealanders and domestic students, although they also admitted that this was a demanding task.

By contrast, during the Colombo Plan era Asian students reported many friendships with local domestic students and host communities. This has implications for Asia New Zealand relationships, especially if it is accepted that the presence of Asian students living and studying in New Zealand offers a significant opportunity to lay foundations for future developing relationships. Of particular importance to us here are where those long-term relationships are with students who have returned to Asia.

### **Home Again: Asian Students' Perspectives on Re-entry**

The re-entry of graduates into their countries of origin is motivated largely by the twin factors of the pull from home and the lack of employment opportunities in New Zealand. Amongst return graduates, a common theme has been their under-preparedness for their re-integration into their home societies (Butcher 2003). Making good adjustments in the areas of lifestyle expectations, worldview change and the Asian work environment are all important for successful re-entry (McGrath 1998).

Re-entry research has demonstrated that in terms of the working environment, graduates tend towards two types of professions. The first type is work in family-owned businesses; often, there had been a purpose in overseas education for that. Frequently, overseas education related to plans for the family to expand their business in some way or other. Sometimes it might simply be to gain quality understanding and methods in running a business, such as accounting and business practices. Other times it was to ensure current technology could be incorporated into the business without the need to go outside the family for partnerships. Where the graduate returned to a family related business or enterprise the family had set in place

for them, inevitably they went through greater adjustments in returning to family desired levels of filial piety (Butcher 2003).

In contrast, the other tendency noted in earlier research has been where graduates were freer in their choices of job selection and the family had no intention of involving them in a family business. This second set of professional choice was a tendency amongst the graduates to move away from locally owned companies and local employers to overseas owned or multinational companies or employers. Seemingly contrary to the point noted above regarding the transportability of their New Zealand education, returnees' commented that their overseas education was better fitted for international companies or multinationals and that they were more comfortable working in that type of environment as the work practices were more in keeping with what they were educated for in New Zealand. However, it is worth noting that these comments were made in discussing the contrast of working for either the family business or for a multi-national company; the issues around the transportability and relevance of New Zealand education nonetheless remain.

### *Asian Countries' Incentives for Returning Students*

Some Asian countries are also providing incentives for their graduate students to return, in particular China, who are adopting policies explicitly to draw back their students from abroad (Ip 2004). Iredale and Gao (2001), in a comparative case study of the roles of returnees to Taiwan, China and Bangladesh, identified benefits to an origin country in recruiting its overseas graduates to return and also showed the transforming and influential roles these same graduates have. Amongst the vehicles for ongoing influence these graduates form were the transnational communities that become agencies for social transformation and conduits for flow-on effects in business and other relationships. In a study of graduates returning to Indonesia, Cannon (2000) found a higher stock was placed on such things as changes in intellectual abilities, attitudes and cultural perspectives than on narrower career advantages such as salary and promotion, which frequently suffer in the immediate term as a consequence of time out for international education.

Many returnees retain contact with New Zealanders and with their own cohort of Asian graduates. These networks are retained in two ways,

formally and informally. Formally, Asian students may be part of alumni associations or international business or trade councils. However, these formal bodies are largely dominated by less recent graduates (Butcher 2003). Recent graduates, by contrast, use more informal links, including computer-mediated communities, such as chat-rooms or blogs (for example, Skykiwi, Ronga, Skype). These computer-mediated communities are increasingly seen as an important and ubiquitous feature in the migration experiences of skilled migrants, in the formation of their identities and in their settlement or re-settlement experiences.

### **Reflections on Enhancing New Zealand Asia Relationships**

Amongst many Colombo Plan students there is tremendous good-will towards New Zealand because of the positive experience many of those students had while here and the ongoing contacts they have with New Zealanders and other alumni. Will the same be able to be said of present Asian students in New Zealand? Or has globalisation wrought its effect upon the world in such a fundamental way that we need to completely re-think how effective person-to-person relationships are? Should we instead undertake a broader, more significant engagement socially, politically and economically with the Asian region, whence most of these Asian students shall return? We would suggest that we need to be careful about how much we rely on nostalgia and the good-will of students past.

We need to support building, facilitating and maintaining person-to-person relationships between Asian students and others in New Zealand, whether that is done formally through educational institutions or informally through groups such as churches and sports-clubs. More often than not Asian students in New Zealand have found their social support through these informal groups rather than through any institutional support and yet these informal groups are often ad hoc and sometimes have hidden agendas (McGrath & Butcher 2004).

Not only do we need to strengthen these informal groups that play such a crucial role in providing social networks for Asian students, but we also need to address issues in the school or university, of mono-cultural curriculum and pedagogy; and in the society at large, of social exclusion and discrimination. We need to include "Asian students" as part of a broader conversation about what it means for New Zealand to engage with Asia.

Asian students need to be considered within the framework of international relations more broadly and not just within the education framework. Additionally, greater emphasis needs to be placed on grasping economic and social opportunities to ensure that the present generation of Asian students become significant on return in positively influencing their countries' relationships with New Zealand, so that these countries, along with their New Zealand graduates, become our friends and allies both now and in the future.

## References

- Asia New Zealand Foundation (2006) *Preparing for a Future with Asia: How New Zealand can Benefit from Asia's Growing Influence*. Wellington: Asia New Zealand Foundation.
- Back, K., Davis, D. and Olsen, A. (1998) *Internationalisation and Tertiary Education Institutions in New Zealand*. Wellington: Ministry of Education.
- Butcher, A. (2003) "Whither International Students? University Reforms in New Zealand 1984–1999". *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies* 38(2):151-164.
- (2004) "Quality Care? Export Education Policies in New Zealand from 1999 to 2002". *ACCESS: Critical Perspectives on Communication, Cultural and Policy Studies* 23(2):21-31.
- Cannon, R. (2000) "The Outcomes of an International Education for Indonesian Graduates: The Third Place"? *Higher Education Research and Development* 19(3):357-379.
- Department of Labour (2006) *Migration Trends 2005/06*. Wellington: Department of Labour.
- Didham, R. and Bedford, R. (2004) "Peopling the Future: Interpreting the Changing Demography of New Zealand". In Spoonley, P., Macpherson, C., and Pearson, D. (eds.) *Tangata Tangata: The Changing Ethnic Contours of New Zealand*, Victoria: Thomson, Dunmore Press, 1-22.
- Ho, E., Li, W., Cooper, J. and Holmes, P. (2007) *The Experiences of Chinese International Students in New Zealand*. Wellington: Education New Zealand.
- Ip, M. (2004) *PRC Migrants and Returnees: New Trends in Globalisation*, Paper presented at the 5<sup>th</sup> Conference of the International Society for the Study of Chinese Overseas ISSCO V Nordic Institute of Asian Studies University of Copenhagen 10-14 May 2004.
- . (2009) Introduction. In Ip, M. (ed.) *The Dragon and the Tanikwa: Maori and Chinese in New Zealand*, Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1-11.
- Iredale, R. and Gao, F. (2001) *The Transforming Role of Skilled and Business Returnees: Taiwan, China and Bangladesh*. Centre for Asia Pacific Social Transformation Studies, New South Wales, Australia: University of Wollongong.
- McGrath, T. (1998) *Homecoming: Reverse Culture Shock in Graduate Re-entry: New Zealand Trained Graduates Returning Home to Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia*.

- Unpublished Master's Thesis, Palmerston North: Institute of Development Studies, Department of Geography, Massey University.
- \_\_\_\_\_ and Butcher, A. (2001) *The Governance of Services for International Students within the Tertiary Education System*. Unpublished Report for the Tertiary Education Advisory Commission, Wellington.
- \_\_\_\_\_ and Butcher, A. (2004) *Campus-Community Linkages in the Pastoral Care of International Students, with Specific Reference to Palmerston North, Wellington and Christchurch*. Wellington: Ministry of Education and Education New Zealand.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Stock, P. and Butcher, A. (2007) *Friends and Allies: The Impact of Returning Asian Students on NZ-Asia Relationships*, Wellington: Asia New Zealand Foundation.
- McInnis, C., Peacock, R. and Catherwood, V. (2006) *Internationalisation in New Zealand Tertiary Education Organisations*. Wellington: Ministry of Education.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (2001) *The Colombo Plan at 50: A New Zealand Perspective, 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Colombo Plan, 1951-2001*. Wellington: Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade.
- Rotherham, F. (2003) 'Export Education – Blip or Bust', *Unlimited Magazine*, 1 September, 2003, <http://www.sharechat.co.nz/features/unlimited/article.php/ea52f8f5n> [accessed 10 April 2007]
- Spoonley, P. and Trlin, A.D. (2004) *Immigration, Immigrants and the Media: Making Sense of Multicultural New Zealand*. Massey University, Palmerston North: New Settlers Programme.
- Tarling, N. (2004) *International Students in New Zealand: The Making of Policy since 1950*. New Zealand Asia Institute, University of Auckland, Auckland.
- Ward, C. and Masgoret, A-M. (2004) *The Experiences of International Students in New Zealand*. Wellington: Ministry of Education.

