

Top tips for international student programmes

Introduction

This guide has been developed for principals and school leaders who are interested in developing their international student programmes.

It distills the key lessons taken from interviews with schools across New Zealand. It covers such topics as marketing, pastoral care, business processes, staffing, planning and student experience.

The tips outlined here are meant as a guide only. Each school needs to decide what will work for them.

You can view the detailed case studies on each school here <http://educationnz.govt.nz/how-we-work/business-development>

Overarching principles

Developing an international student programme requires significant effort on the part of school leaders. In addition to ensuring quality student experiences, it also requires a focus on developing the programme as a business.

- Have a commitment to the quality of the programme and the student experience – not just the income.
- Consider all the elements required to make a successful programme:
 - Quality and availability of English language classes / tuition
 - In-school support
 - Homestay availability and quality
 - Integration into the school community
 - Extracurricular activities
 - Marketing and promotion
 - Staffing.
- The programme needs to be run as a business, requiring specific skills.
- Support of the board of trustees, the principal, and other staff is essential.
- Communicate with the school and community about what you are doing, why you are doing it, and involve them – show both the cultural and economic benefits that hosting international students can bring.

Planning and processes

International programmes require careful planning and focus, both at the start-up phase and to ensure long-term effectiveness and sustainability.

- It's essential to have a strategic plan for the development of your international programme. Your plan should cover such key topics as:
 - Target numbers
 - Resources required

- Marketing plan and tactics
- Evaluation of each channel and the return on investment of these
- Target markets (niches within particular countries)
- Academic support
- Homestay management
- Staffing
- Product development.
- In addition to a strategic plan, you should have a marketing plan, updated annually.
- Put in place systems and processes that capture knowledge and information, so information is not lost when staff leave or are unavailable.
- Be responsive – the world does not stop turning! Answer emails/enquiries within 24 hours, even during the holidays, and consider not using out of office messages.
- Consider having your programme peer reviewed to identify opportunities for improvement.

Economic viability

Developing an economically viable international programme can take a minimum of three years ongoing investment and a focus on analysing return on investment.

- Take a methodical, planned and considered approach with a good understanding of the financial principles and the true costs and returns.
- Target \$20,000 for marketing (or more depending on size of school).
- Returns to school range from 30 to 40 per cent of tuition fees.
- Identify the true costs of running an international programme – including staffing.
- Analyse where money is being spent, and the return on that investment (cost of recruitment per student).
- Find an appropriate balance between long and short-stay students. Short-stay students require just as much work to enrol and manage as a long-term student. This needs to be reflected in pricing.
- Short-courses may need to be offered during NZ school holidays (e.g. to accommodate school breaks from target countries). Consider joining together with other schools to gain economies of scale.
- Invest for the long-term.

Staffing

Appropriately skilled staff are the key to ensuring operational and strategic success of your international programme. Staff need to understand and respond to the unique and demanding requirements of working internationally.

- There are five key functions to most international programmes (they don't need to be undertaken by five separate people). Identify who is going to take responsibility for what:
 - Administration, writing to agents, acknowledging enquiries, assisting with visa applications
 - Financial management
 - Pastoral care - looking after the student and communicating with / supporting the parents, shaking the hands, going to the airport. Can include bilingual staff.
 - Marketing and overseas travel
 - Academic management, liaising with class teacher and helping with the students' learning programme.

- Employ staff with the right marketing, sales, administration skills for the job – or up-skill as necessary.
- Appoint experienced and suitable teaching staff to ensure the student’s academic success.
- A distributed staffing model where jobs are shared amongst a wider group can help an international culture spread across the school and means more brains for brainstorming, but this needs to be well-coordinated to work.
- If functions are shared, it is useful to have one person who understands all aspects of the programme, who can respond to any query.
- For larger schools, a native speaker to recruit and support students can improve success in a particular market.

There is a range of views on how many staff hours are required for international programs. The table below attempts to summarise what some schools have found works. It is a guide only, and not intended to be prescriptive.

A GUIDE FOR SCHOOLS, EXCLUDING ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING STAFF

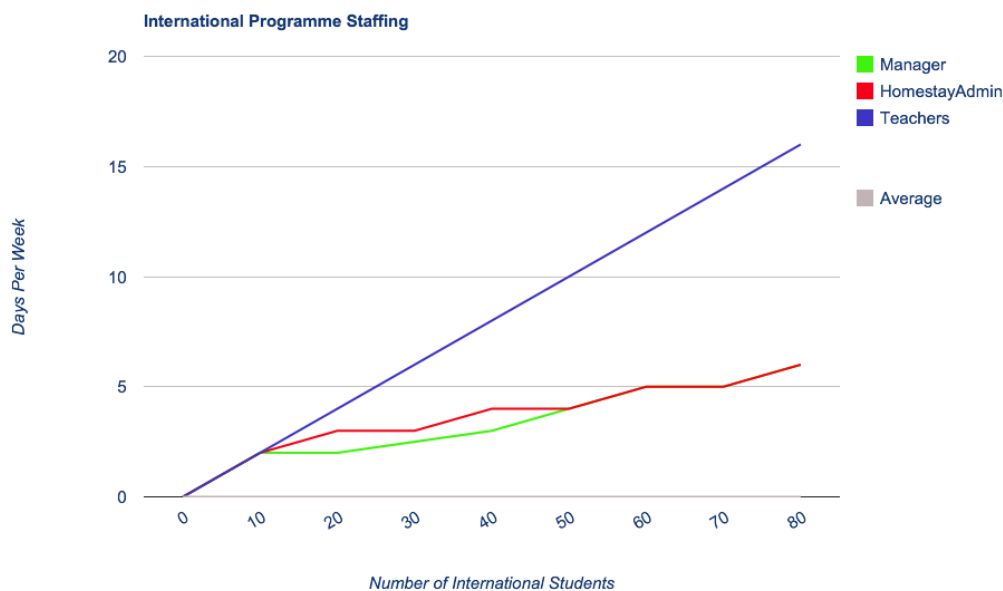
Number of students	Programme Manager/ International Dean (FTE)	Administration/Support (FTE)	Accommodation/Homestay * (FTE)
20	0.5	0.3	0.4
30	.8 – 1	0.5	0.5
40	1	0.8	0.75
60	1	1	1
100	1	2	1.75

*Students housed with designated caregivers (DCGs) will require less time

- You need about 1 FTE teaching resource per 20 students.
- 1.5 – 2 staff hours per week per student is a good rule of thumb.

Example: A school staffing model

Staff resourcing will vary according to the nature of a school’s programme. This is an example of how one school has analysed their staff needs relative to the number of international students it hosts. It is a guide only, and not intended to be prescriptive.



Marketing

What is your market? Often schools go offshore seeking to sell the product they currently have, rather than thinking about how to deliver what the market is demanding.

- You have to actively recruit students – they won't just turn up at your school gate.
- Find a point of difference for your school. Identify what your school has to offer and how that differs from other New Zealand and international schools.
- Identify niche programmes that set your school apart, such as horse riding, music, surfing...
- Be confident about the stories you tell but don't try to be something you're not.
- Don't try to be all things to all markets. Match what you can offer with what markets want.
- Marketing budgets vary; \$20,000 is generally a minimum. Marketing spend per student can generally range from 5 to 10 per cent of total tuition fee income (\$700 to \$1,250/student).
- Recruitment channels vary between schools, but often involve a focus on agents, supported by international education fairs. Word of mouth recommendations and referrals from alumni are the most effective and cost-effective marketing tools.
- Cast the net wide for agents and persevere until you build a relationship – don't give up.
- Use local agents first – don't fly off overseas yourself until you have undertaken comprehensive research and have a market strategy in place.
- Do your homework on the market before rushing off overseas. Once a lead is qualified, then visit.
- Build and retain relationships with agents, homestay families, students and alumni, constantly reminding all of what your school has to offer.
- Consider bringing agents to your school – especially for schools outside the main centres.
- School-to-school relationships may provide a constant source of students over time.
- Regional collectives can be beneficial, particularly in smaller or more isolated regions where a collective can pool resources to boost their profile.
- Network with other schools that are already recruiting international students. Don't pinch their business but learn how they do it.
- For primary schools, ask local high schools which agents they use and work with them on pathways for learning. Ask them to promote you when they go overseas.

- Analyse the competition outside New Zealand – we are competing internationally.
- Before you go anywhere, ensure you have a website which addresses the key information needs of prospective students and their parents.
- Have a quality website with dedicated pages in different languages.

Student experience

A focus on ensuring positive and quality experiences for international students is vital for student satisfaction and recruitment of students into the future.

- Personalise the experience for all international students – even when you have more than 100.
- Ensure there is a place at school where students feel safe and at home. Some schools provide a dedicated international space for students or encourage students to use the common student spaces to assist them to integrate – all provide a refuge for international students where they can feel safe.
- Build a strong internal support programme for international students – such as a buddy programme. Consider an International Students Association.
- Be mindful of the number of any one nationality within the school and each class to minimize “ethnic bunching”.
- Students often integrate more with other students when there are fewer international students and small numbers from one country.
- Do not overwhelm students with information on their first days – focus on welcoming the student to the school and work out the details once they have settled in.
- Ensure students feel like they “belong”.
- Don’t forget the small things that make all the difference – welcomes, farewells, dinner parties, orientation events.
- Conduct exit interviews to identify ways to improve the experience for future students.

Academic

International students often find New Zealand’s education system very different to the system in their home country. Many also have high expectations from family to live up to. Consider the support services and systems you have available to help your international students settle in and succeed.

- A higher level of academic support is required by some students to ensure they succeed.
- Create profiles of each new international student which are shared with teachers so everyone understands the student’s English language skills and background – this helps ease the student into the school.
- Some schools have specific academic-focused teacher aides who look after cohorts of four to five students.
- Some schools have a simplified curriculum written to accommodate students with less English language ability.
- Ensure the expectations of students, parents and their agents are managed and realistic to prevent disappointment. On-going communication is key.
- Communicate effectively with parents of younger children so they understand how the education system works in New Zealand and how class time and reporting differs from their home.

Homestays

The experience of international students in New Zealand is significantly shaped by the quality of their homestay. Homestay families also require information and support to host students from other cultures.

- Look for homestay families who the students can relate to, who are connected to the school, who will care for and enhance the student's experience in New Zealand.
- Ideally families will have children of their own and understand teenagers.
- Homestay families should have an interest in other cultures, want to be involved in the school community, and are going to be interested in the life of the students. Ideally host families will take the student to sports events, take them away, check their homework etc.
- Try to match students who come for the short sports-focused courses with a sporting family who have similar interests.
- Communicate regularly with homestay parents and be available 24/7. Under the Code of Practice for the Pastoral Care of International Students, you have a responsibility to their welfare. Understand the requirements of the Code of Practice.
- Homestays for primary schools need to accommodate a parent and the child, usually in a home setting.
- Parents accompanying children need more support – buying a car, getting a phone etc., requiring greater investment in time and resource than for an older student alone.
- Issues where schools may need to work closely with homestay families can include attendance, bedtimes and internet usage.
- A guide to living in New Zealand, particularly outside main centres, helps manage students and their homestay parents' expectations.
- Be mindful that students may not feel able to complain if they are unhappy. Provide a supportive environment where students feel comfortable to share their concerns. You may need to have bilingual support available for this.