

# Lifting international student success through contextualised foundation studies

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Creating opportunities for, and expectations of success as a benchmark for students to live up to, can be prophetic. This paper recounts the experience of a pilot study with international students who were accepted for entry into Diploma level programmes, despite a lower International English Language Testing System (IELTS) score than is usually accepted. Students participated in an accelerated and built-in Foundation study skills pathway before joining both domestic, and international direct-entry peers who had begun with a higher IELTS score. A mixed-methods evaluation was conducted to compare the transition, success and outcomes of students who completed the International Foundation Pathway (IFP) entry with direct entry and domestic students. Results from eight Engineering and four Quantity Surveying courses showed that in at least half, IFP students' average grade was equal or ahead of direct entry and/or domestic students. Teachers saw no discernible difference between the progress of the two groups of international students in their class, and students shared stories of confidence, satisfaction, and leadership. Yet, although every participant involved in this evaluation was enthusiastic about the benefits afforded by the IFP programmes, a number of barriers were identified alongside the proven enabling strategies. These findings have enabled the home institute to develop additional guidelines around transition, success and outcomes for international students, shared here in the hope that they will resonate beyond the boundaries of our own small, first pilot.

**Key Words:** International students, pathway, foundation studies, success.

## 1. Background: Getting the 'right' international students

International enrolments are now New Zealand's fourth largest export industry (Merwood, 2007). Government data shows that the upward trend in international student numbers that started in 2009 has continued to the present day; in 2016 there were 62,600 international students studying with a post-secondary provider, constituting 15% of the total 416,000 enrolled in the sector (Ministry of Education, 2017). In addition to much needed revenue, these students bring vibrancy and richness to our campuses, so that when all goes well, we have an undeniable win-win situation. As Merwood (2007) notes, "international students ... contribute to knowledge creation and transfer within educational institutions" (p. 6), and compel the institutions themselves to strive to improve the quality of their services.

Higher education organisations in western countries rely heavily on international students, but we only want the 'right' ones – those intent on acquiring a higher qualification, rather than seeing a student visa as an avenue to permanent residency. We also need students who are realistic about their academic ability in relation to the level of study they are undertaking. These students can be

difficult to identify, especially through offshore enrolment. Consequently, there would be few educators who have not at some time wondered how certain students managed entry into their class.

Ironically, eligibility is often decided by external entities rather than the teaching and learning professionals who will actually be responsible for ultimate academic success, those who are tasked with the face-to-face learning successes of these students. One example of the legislative barriers and organisational gate-keeping that international students find themselves up against is the minimum requirement of a relatively high entry language qualification. In New Zealand, it is a 6.0 academic International English Language Testing System (IELTS) score for diploma or degree-level study. This is a Ministry of Education mandate, made with the explanation that the assurances offered to students intending to study in New Zealand – of achieving qualifications that are at a standard comparable to qualifications achieved in leading educational institutions in other parts of the world – must be upheld (NZQA, 2014).

This paper describes what happened when we tested this traditional wisdom by offering a pilot study with a small number of international students with an IELTS score of 5.5, and who would therefore normally have been excluded from enrolling in these programmes.

## **2. The study**

### **2.1. Setting**

Our organisation, Toi-Ohomai Institute of Technology, is a new higher education provider, incorporated in May 2016 as the result of a merger of two smaller institutions. Both had a long history of vocational education in their home cities, Tauranga and Rotorua (located about an hour's drive apart in the central-east of the North Island of New Zealand), as well as delivery through a number of satellite campuses in nearby smaller centres. Each legacy institution had its own programmes and curricula, its own teaching and learning development model, and its own quality monitoring processes. There were some crossovers of discipline, but also some areas of specialisation. In addition, each had different student – and faculty – demographics, with the Rotorua centre having a higher percentage of Māori (New Zealand's indigenous people), and international students. The merger offered the opportunity to provide more balance to these disparate student representations, including international student representation across different qualifications, from certificate to post-graduate studies. One of the issues much discussed by the newly combined teaching teams was just how much international students' entry requirements impacted on their success.

### **2.2. The IFP programme structure and place within the 'enabling' tradition**

In late 2015, Bay of Plenty Polytechnic received New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) approval for new pathway programmes for international students which consisted of the Certificate in Foundation Studies Level 4 plus selected Level 6 Diplomas taught in two years and 17 weeks (or an accelerated delivery of two years and 12 weeks). International students were able to enrol into the International Foundation Pathway (IFP) programmes with an International English Language Testing System (IELTS) score of 5.5 (rather than 6.0).

The IFP Programme originally included options for four diploma programmes, although only two of these options attracted enrolments during the available timeframe: New Zealand Diploma in Engineering (Civil, Mechanical, Electrical strands), and New Zealand Diploma in Construction (Quantity Surveying). A total of 21 students completed the foundation programme and continued with diploma-level programmes in engineering and quantity surveying; one student subsequently transferred to professional cookery, and one student withdrew.

Toi Ohomai was the only institution in New Zealand offering such a pathway combining foundation studies with a transition to approved diploma programmes to international students with this lower-than-stipulated level of English language proficiency. Of course, both in New Zealand and

overseas, there is a well-established role for pathway programmes that scaffold learners into higher education, as Wilson and Devereux (2013) describe:

This is where the metaphor of scaffolding can be productive, conjuring up the idea of a building under construction. With the help of scaffolding, the student can construct knowledge and perform tasks well beyond their current capacity. As the student gains confidence and ability, the scaffolding can be gradually removed. Finally, the construction stands firm; and the student is able to perform the task unassisted and is now ready to progress to more advanced tasks (p. A91).

Doherty and Singh (2005) give an account of what scaffolding looks like in an enabling programme to assist newcomers in an Australian university to reposition themselves from outsider 'Other', to belonging, through a pedagogical understanding of 'how the West is done'. Baker, Irwin, Freeman, Nance, and Coleman (2018) describe an educational, linguistic and cultural programme to support adult students from refugee backgrounds transitions into university, which at first glance has many similarities to the IFP programme described here. McDougall, Holden, and Danaher (2012) offer insights from an established enabling programme which promotes a 'pedagogy of hope' as an avenue for social and personal transformation, alongside the academic curriculum. These are merely three of many such programmes which are producing proven outcomes in their quest to enable and empower international student sojourners in an unfamiliar culture, and an unfamiliar academic paradigm.

The IFP programme fits easily within this body of work; and even in New Zealand, the real point of difference is largely procedural: that the students enrolled in a single course of study, which included the foundation pathway content, rather than completing this content as a stand-alone prerequisite. Unfortunately, this initiative is currently suspended. Although these IFP programmes were approved by NZQA and met the approval criteria, the programme approval was queried by Immigration New Zealand (INZ). Subsequently, INZ declined International Pathway visas from the 1st of April 2016, based on Rule 18 overruling the 5.5 IELTS entry from countries with visa approvals under 80% (NZQA, 2013). Based on the results from this study, we continue to advocate for a reversal of this ruling.

### **2.3. IFP content**

The IFP programmes were designed to provide a pathway into diploma level study through improving students' academic study skills, developing reading and writing ability, and increasing proficiency in both written and oral communication in English. Foundation content was contextualised to the particular programmes of study they intended to enter. Available electives focused on information management, English reading and writing skills, maths, and social sciences.

Before the content was finalised, a long-list of possible topics suggested by both staff from the International Office, and Diploma teaching teams based on their experience of previous intakes of international students, was compared to relevant studies from the literature. Topics generally fell into three categories: language, context, and cultural perspectives (Butcher & McGrath, 2004; Craven, 2009; Li et al., 2002).

There is a widespread acknowledgement among commentators, too, that the social needs of international students are just as important as the academic needs. While international students may have chosen to study outside their countries for fairly specific reasons, making contacts with New Zealanders, on and off campus, is a common denominator (Ramsey, Ramsey, & Mason, 2007). This can be difficult:

Kiwi students [might] like to befriend and assist international students to overcome an obvious social isolation, [but] do not want this to be at the expense of their own immediate education. They may be reluctant to form groups with

international students for shared assignments or to see much of their class devoted to filling in the background for those from different cultural and language groups. Similarly, teaching staff today frequently feel torn between recognising that international students may require more help to adjust, but not wanting to alter their delivery of course content in any way that might promote the needs of international students over Kiwis (Fraser & Simpson, 2012, p. 3).

Numerous studies attest to the impact of a low incidence of intercultural interaction on the cultural, emotional and psychological wellbeing of international students (e.g. Ward & Masgoret, 2004), and hence their academic success rate (Arkoudis et al., 2010; Brebner, 2008; Ho, Li, Cooper, & Holmes, 2005; Ramsey et al., 2007; TEC, 2009).

In addition to the very understandable need for psychosocial connectedness, for success students also need self-efficacy, or “belief in their ability to perform academic tasks” (Habel, 2009, p. 94). As Habel notes, ‘self-confidence’ and ‘self-esteem’ can sometimes be problematic in a classroom setting, and high levels of subjective self-worth can even be disadvantageous or harmful when they lead to negative behaviours. An example observed by some of our tutors with other international students, was a counter-productive over-confidence that previous success in their home environment, and paying their tuition fees, would be enough to guarantee success abroad. Instead, we tried to focus on developing students’ sense of ‘self-concept’ or own identity related to their current place in the world, and self-efficacy, as a more future-focussed sense of their own agency and ability to achieve their own goals (Margolis & McCabe, 2006) – in study, as well as in their time on New Zealand, in general.

Based on such studies, as well as the IFP programme development team’s own observations, a platform of Foundation study skills was prepared. Some core academic and pastoral care components were:

- Active learning. This included asking questions, participating in class activities and exercises, taking responsibility for managing their own schedules, establishing study groups.
- Critical, analytical and logical thinking was embedded throughout the programme with students encouraged to be curious, to seek evidence and examples, and recognise different types of information and ‘authority’. Creativity was a concept new to many students, as was reflection as part of the learning process.
- Computer skills, such as using the Microsoft suite (Word, Excel, PowerPoint etc.), formatting and uploading and downloading content from the Learning Management System.
- Oral communication, including both formal presentation skills and the appropriate terms of address and language to use with teachers and peers.
- Written communication. Skills here included formal and informal writing, paraphrasing and summarising, essay and report structures and conventions, and presenting an argument.
- Researching. Information literacy here included identifying reliable sources and the difference between fact and opinion. Referencing, citing and avoiding plagiarism were emphasised and practised extensively.
- Personal wellness. Managing physical, emotional and mental health was a focus here, including cultural shock and homesickness. Students were encouraged to make social connections to foster friendships, and to be involved in the community through volunteering, church groups and sport and recreation group memberships.
- Cultural development. This was chiefly about raising awareness of New Zealand’s bicultural status, such as the importance and value of Māori language, and some of the major Māori cultural sensitivities, including issues around spitting, sitting on tables, not touching another’s head, etc. Other more generic western courtesies were also addressed, including saying please, thank-you, apologising, excusing themselves, and replying to emails, texts and class forum posts.

- Ethics. With the possibility of work placements and internships as part of a future study programme, students learned about relationships between all stakeholders of a workplace, including privacy and confidentiality, safety, respect, integrity and honesty.

## 2.4. Evaluation objective

The IFP programmes were an innovative initiative, previously untried in the sector, which represented an institution-wide approach involving senior leadership, the international team, programme leaders and tutors, learning advisors and pastoral care support staff. Key to this initiative's design and implementation was the motivation and support of faculty managers, keen to raise student numbers, and ensure these led to strong completion and success outcomes. This enthusiasm is exemplified by the following comment:

*I was supportive of this from the beginning. The whole idea was looking at the prospective students who couldn't come because they couldn't make the IELTS entry – it was just so hard to meet that level.* (Head of School, Applied Technology)

Because this was a new initiative and Toi Ohomai was the only institution to have offered this pathway programme to international students, it was seen as important to evaluate the feasibility of the programme, and whether it was successful in preparing these students for diploma-level study when their IELTS was slightly below what is usually required. During the same period of time, many other international students who did have an IELTS score of 6.0 commenced their studies in the same programmes, offering an opportunity to compare both study experiences and outcomes between the two groups of students. Hence this evaluation's aims were:

- To evaluate the success of the IFP programmes (including the Certificate in Foundation Studies Level 4) by interviewing students about the value of the programme in assisting with their transition into a chosen field of study;
- To compare educational success/outcomes of international students who completed the IFP programme with those of international students who entered directly into diploma programmes.

## 3. Methodology

A mixed-methods case study approach was taken, with information collected from the following sources and informants:

- Programme results from eight Engineering and four Quantity Surveying courses, with averages reported for three groups of students: IFP programmes students, direct entry international students, and domestic students.
- Interviews and focus groups with 15 IFP students (from an eligible pool of 20) and direct entry students in the same courses (10). All IFP students were from India (although from different regions and with different first languages), as were almost all direct entry international students in the Engineering and Quantity Surveying Diplomas in the 2016 cohorts.
- Interviews with 11 staff members, including non-native New Zealanders (Head of School and four teachers in foundation and destination Diploma programmes, the international manager and two pastoral care team members, two foundation pathway teachers, and one learning support staff member).
- Student comments taken from course evaluations for the foundation programmes. (Low numbers in the pilot offerings meant that these students did not complete course evaluations as a separate cohort, so that the aggregated quantitative data available from the three foundation course intakes in which these students were included was not reflective of this particular group, and is therefore not reported here. Quotations from these evaluations were

only used when the content made it clear that the source was an IFP student, rather than a domestic student).

Throughout the data collection process, all the usual ethical guidelines for conducting social science research were adhered to, including informed consent, anonymity, and the opportunity to review transcripts. An additional element was the nature of our key participant group. As international students are a minority group on campus, studying in a foreign culture and a second language, and therefore particularly vulnerable, the evaluation team were mindful of a possible power imbalance when seeking their feedback. Therefore, all interviews were conducted by two members of the research team who had had no previous involvement with the students in a teaching, learning support or pastoral care capacity, and therefore had no preformed opinion about students' abilities, and no future impact on their learning outcomes.

The two sets of data were analysed separately. Student outcomes data, that is, course results for the two groups of international students, IFP and direct entry, as well as the domestic students in each course, were compared by average course results, via an Excel spreadsheet. Individual outcomes of pass and no pass for IFP students for each course were also identified, alongside total class outcomes.

The qualitative data was analysed individually by three members of the team to ensure as accurate and non-subjective interpretation as possible. Main themes were then debated and agreed, looking for commonality between the key issues discussed by students and staff. Similarly, course evaluations for the foundation programme were analysed to identify the things that students found most helpful, and any challenges they identified. These were then compared with, and aligned to, the themes arising from the interview and focus group data.

#### 4. Student outcomes data

Table 1 presents the numbers and percentages of students who passed each of the 12 courses in their first year of diploma-level study. In eight of these 12 courses, all IFP students passed. In five of these courses, all direct entry international students also passed. In the two Civil Engineering courses, none of the three IFP students passed. Completions for direct entry (DE) students in these two courses were also low, with only one DE student achieving a pass in CIVL4002. Completions for IFP students and for direct entry international students were also low for the Engineering Fundamentals and Engineering Mathematics courses (MECH 4001 and MECH 4005), with IFP students performing slightly better than direct entry students.

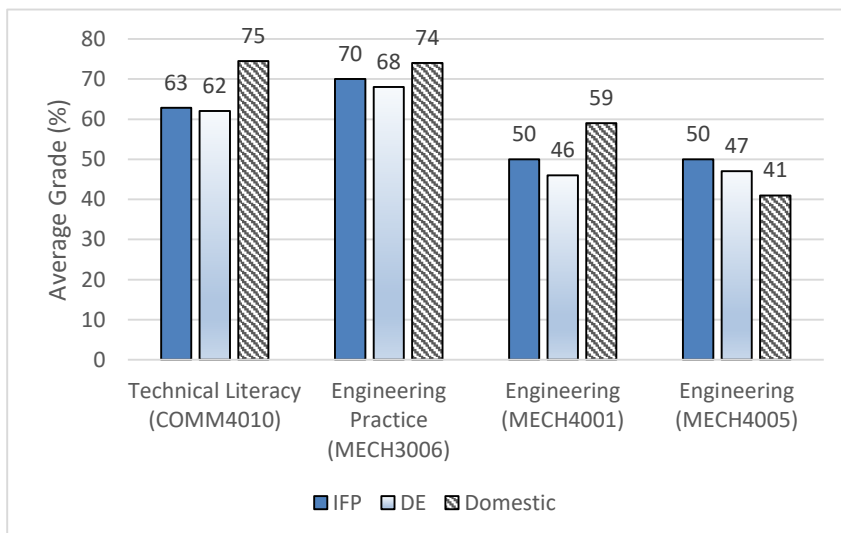
**Table 1.** Course completion rates for domestic, IFP and direct entry students in diploma-level courses.

Course	Domestic		International Direct Entry		International Foundation Pathway		Course completions (all students)	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
<b>COMM4010</b>	2	100%	7	100%	5	100%	14	100%
<b>MECH3006</b>	2	100%	7	100%	5	100%	14	100%
<b>MECH4001</b>	9	82%	3	30%	7	54%	19	55.5%
<b>MECH4005</b>	5	36%	4	33%	6	46%	18	37.5%
<b>CIVL4002</b>	10	71%	1	33%	0	0%	11	55%

Table 1 continued.

Course	Domestic		International Direct Entry		International Foundation Pathway		Course completions Total	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
<b>CIVL5003</b>	8	62%	0	0%	0	0%	8	44.4%
<b>ELEL4024</b>	5	100%	-	-	5	100%	10	100%
<b>ELEL5008</b>	5	100%	-	-	5	100%	10	100%
<b>BULD5057</b>	21	100%	7	88%	3	100%	31	96.9%
<b>BULD5058</b>	19	90%	8	100%	3	100%	30	93.8%
<b>BULD5059</b>	18	86%	8	100%	3	100%	29	90.6%
<b>BULD5064</b>	16	89%	8	100%	3	100%	27	93.1%

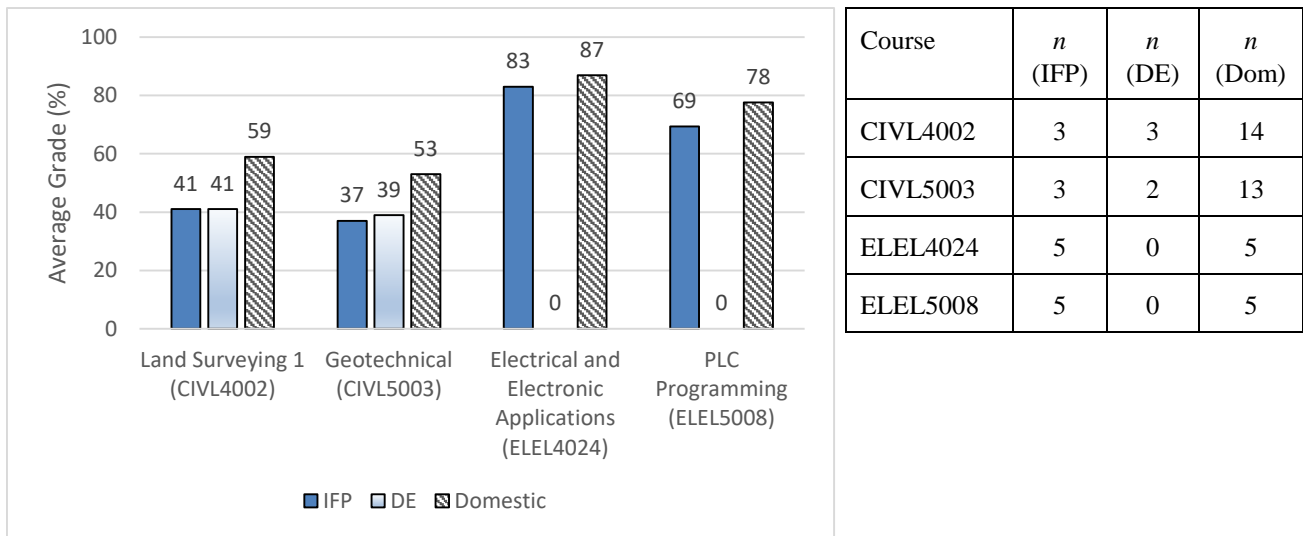
Average grades for IFP students were compared with those of direct entry international students (referred to as DE in the keys for the following figures), and domestic students. Because the number of students in each course and each programme varies, and therefore the average given may reflect the final scores of as few as two students, or as many as 23, these graphs provide an ‘indication only’ of student achievement. Student numbers are included with each graph, to assist with the interpretation of this data. The largest number of IFP students in any one course were the 12 IFP Engineering students who all attended the ‘Fundamentals’ and ‘Mathematics’ courses in Figure 1 below. In both these courses, the IFP students out-scored the direct entry international students, and in Mathematics, a topic covered in their Foundation study, they out-performed the domestic students also.



Course	<i>n</i> (IFP)	<i>n</i> (DE)	<i>n</i> (Dom)
COMM4010	5	7	2
MECH3006	5	7	2
MECH4001	13	10	11
MECH4005	13	12	23

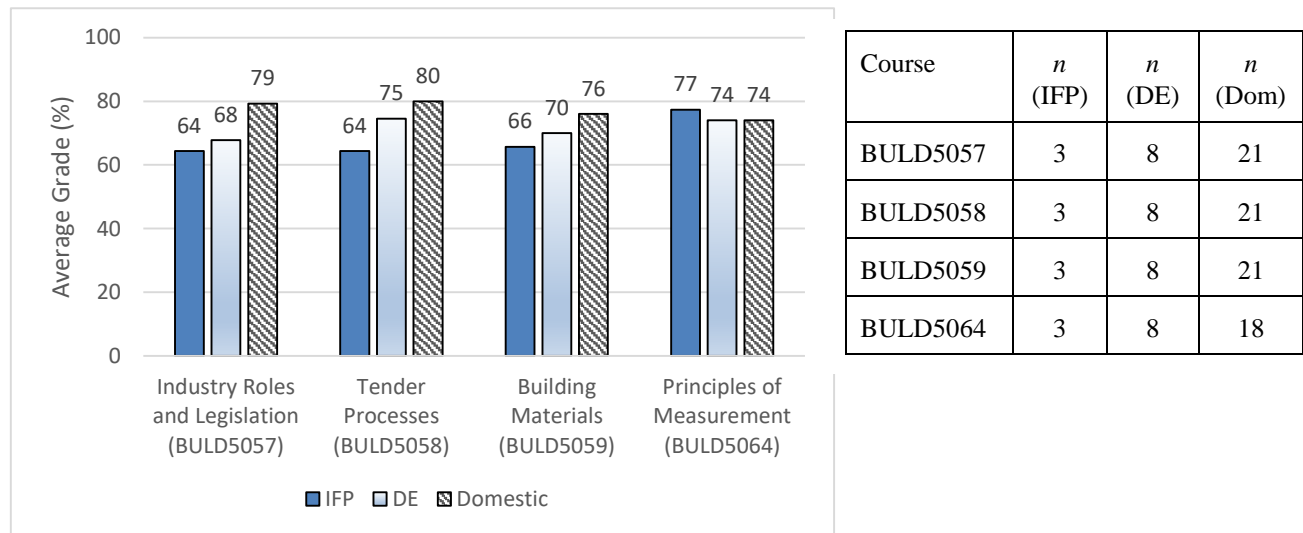
**Figure 1.** Average grades for three groups of students in four shared or Mechanical Engineering courses (Semester Two, 2016). The numbers in the table give the number of students in each group for each course.

While grades were low for all students in Mechanical and Civil courses, both IFP and domestic students in both the Electrical courses achieved higher grades; there were no direct entry international students in these two courses (Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Average grades for three groups of students in two Civil and two Electrical Engineering courses (Semester Two, 2016). The numbers in the table give the number of students in each group for each course.

Figure 3 shows the average grades for each group of students in the four Quantity Surveying courses; the greatest differences between the IFP and domestic students are seen in the legislation (BULD5057) and tendering (BULD5058) courses which require more interpretive and written work. In the mathematics-based measurement course (BULD5064), as for Engineering Mathematics (Figure 1), the IFP students’ average was slightly ahead of their classmates’.



**Figure 3.** Average grades for three groups of students in four Quantity Surveying courses (Semester Two, 2016). The numbers in the table give the number of students in each group for each course.

To determine if IFP students were disadvantaged by their lower IELTS entry requirement compared to direct entry students, t-tests were conducted to compare mean grades of IFP and direct entry students in each of the courses. No statistically significant difference between the international foundation pathway students and direct entry international students was found for any of



the courses. Because of the large number of t-tests conducted, the Bonferroni correction was used which required a probability of 0.005 for statistical significance (0.05/10, where 10 = the number of t-tests conducted). In addition, the validity of these tests is limited by the small numbers of students in some of the groups.

**Table 2.** Mean grades for IFP and direct entry (DE) students in diploma-level courses revealing the differences were not statistically significant.

Course Code	DE Mean Grade	IFP Mean Grade	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i> (2 tailed)
COMM4010	62	62.8	0.26	0.80
MECH3006	68.4	69.6	0.56	0.59
MECH4001	45.7	50.2	0.78	0.44
MECH4005	47.1	49.8	0.42	0.68
CIVL4002	41.3	41.0	0.03	0.98
CIVL5003	39	36.5	0.33	0.77
BULD5057	67.8	64.3	0.51	0.62
BULD5058	74.5	64.3	2.53	0.03
BULD5059	70	65.7	1.12	0.29
BULD5064	74	77.3	1.31	0.22

## 5. Evaluation findings

### 5.1. Perceived value of IFP programmes

Every IFP student interviewed for this evaluation, every Foundation or Diploma tutor, and every manager, international and support team member, saw value in the IFP approach to preparing international students for higher level study. Even some of the direct entry students who weren't part of the experience recognised its value for their classmates; there were no dissenting voices.

There was widespread recognition that study expectations, class activities and assessment protocols were very different in New Zealand compared to India. Much of the Foundation study was focused on introducing students to these new teaching and learning modes, the benefit of which is described here by an IFP student:

*We learned so many things that are different to study in India. We knew to do the referencing, not to copy.* (IFP student)

Another central focus was English language development since the IFP students entered with a lower IELTS score than their direct entry international classmates. Although we did not formally re-test students' proficiency in English, improvements certainly occurred, even when the students didn't realise this until they reflected on their progress. International pastoral support staff also noticed and commented on the language skills of IFP students compared to direct entry students:

*Towards the middle of their foundation programme, they got so fluent, so fluent, their English literally jumped. This was the outstanding change we saw in the students enrolled (in IFP Programmes) – improvement in English.* (Diploma tutor)

Students were also learning many of the ‘study skills’ required for successful academic life in a New Zealand tertiary institution, and the skill most often cited was communication. Students valued the opportunity to ‘find their voice’ with tutors and classmates, and to learn this country’s ‘classroom etiquette’ about asking questions, offering opinions and participating in group work.

Other skills that students appreciated encountering prior to commencing the diploma portion of their IFP programmes included punctuality: getting into the habit of coming to class and submitting assignments on time; and research. Students and foundation tutors talked about significant time and work spent on locating resources, referencing these correctly, and using these to support their own, original work, rather than copying and pasting swathes of material from the Internet.

Students valued being on campus, just to get the lie of the land – and part of the Foundation course included visiting classrooms, meeting their Diploma tutors, and learning about the support services available.

Above all, the perception of value was evident in the direct comparisons students made between IFP and direct entry experiences:

*The tutors showed us many times about the assignments and how they should look and we could learn about doing presentations. But the students who did direct entry found that harder, they must learn really fast in class and it can be very stressful for them.*

## 5.2. Settling in

Feedback from the international team, learning advisor (international), programme tutors and the students themselves regarding the IFP programmes was very positive, with each of these groups attesting that the IFP students did feel more settled and prepared to concentrate on their diploma study than their direct entry counterparts. As one staff member told us:

*When we see them around campus, and after a short time on their foundation programme, they are calling out to us and waving across the campus. I believe they are more relaxed than the direct entry students [as they are] more likely to wave and call out to us.*

Another observation from the international team was that the IFP students had a noticeably higher aptitude for engaging in conversation and an ability to use and understand colloquialisms following their Foundation study. The International team noted that they were likely to see the direct entry students more frequently as they requested more help with form-filling, locating different campus offices, learning about support availability and bookings, and also homesickness. They attributed this difference to an observation that:

*The IFP students have been through all that, we don’t see these requests for help any more, they have had their time to be homesick and settle in. For direct entry students it’s just more difficult for them to deal with so much all at once.*  
(International pastoral support staff)

The acculturation process of the students was an important part of their time on the IFP programmes, including the adoption of appropriate social conventions, ideas, values, and campus behaviour. Two examples of cultural misunderstanding show the need for this phase. One situation involved the inappropriate use of Facebook, which resulted in a domestic female class member feeling compromised by a male student who referred to her in an overly affectionate manner. The situation was dealt with by the IFP tutors, who explained the accepted protocols, and boundaries to the entire class, without referring to the particular student involved, but with his previously obtained consent to use the example as a teaching opportunity. Another example was caused by friction between students from different provinces within India, which led to some disparities in perceptions of hierarchy. Again, tutors were able to use this disharmony constructively, acknowledging existing cultural features, and emphasising a classroom culture wherein all are

equal. Settling these issues prior to the students entering their diploma study, ensured a harmonious transition for all.

Students, too, appreciated the settling in period accorded by the IFP programmes. This included not only the accepted norms of learning and study, but also accommodation, health care, transport and shopping:

*It was easier to start studying straight away compared to other international students, so I feel my grades have been better ... because I didn't have to worry about all the other things; the Foundation helped me to know where I can go to get help, where to find everything, how to organise some things in my life after the Polytech day; all the basics about being a student here. It is so different to India.*

As a result, students said, they felt more comfortable engaging with domestic students in their Diploma classes, were confident to speak up, and continued to ask for help once in their chosen course of study. While the Diploma tutors generally felt that all international students were academically stronger in their second semester of study, two tutors mentioned the IFP students had a firmer grasp of colloquial language and the accents of their domestic classmates, and that sharing their knowledge with the direct entry students further enhanced their confidence.

### 5.3. Communication and relationships

In all three focus group meetings, students agreed that out of everything in the Foundation programme, learning to communicate was the biggest gain. They recognised that the English study they had done in India was largely oriented to IELTS, so that at first, everyday activities in New Zealand such as getting a bus and functioning in the supermarket were challenging and frustrating. As one Foundation tutor noted, Hindi is a very fast language, and students need to learn to slow down to be easily understood. The non-verbal communication styles of Indian students and New Zealanders are also markedly different. For example, when the Indian students shook their heads, they were saying “yes”, which was confusing to their teachers and peers. Such issues were addressed in lessons, as examples arose.

Communication skills are essential to building relationships, and this was a parallel gain enjoyed by IFP students. A critical element in our institution's Foundation and Bridging programmes is the emphasis on orientation, whānaungatanga (relationship building) and strengthening personal confidence, competence and motivation. All of these elements contribute to building self-concept and self-efficacy (Habel, 2009), by empowering students to engage directly with peers, staff and their wider social community. Although the length of time spent in the Foundation portion of the IFP programmes varied between the three intakes, all the IFP students participated in these activities. IFP students particularly enjoyed mixing with domestic students in Social Sciences and Maths electives. As one IFP student said, “*We [spent] lots of time with the Kiwi [people] so we [could] get the language faster and feel better about going to the classroom for our engineering.*”

There was also a lot of group work in classes where students from different places—including from different states in India—were able to break down some fairly strongly-entrenched preconceived ideas about each other and find common ground. Sharing information and ideas in the common language of English necessarily involved sharing and questioning cultural values and beliefs.

The Foundation programme also included several extended sessions and walking tours with Toi Ohomai's Mātauranga Facilitator, who gave the students some insights into Māori language, non-verbal communication and history, including the protection, partnership and participation requirements of the Treaty of Waitangi – relevant to Diploma courses, such as Legislation, and to the wider learning environment. One Foundation tutor observed just how useful this was:

*Identifying and understanding the cultural misunderstandings and faux pas that occur is crucial for students to work comfortably and effectively in their classes, and having someone address these before they went into Diploma study was surely useful.*

#### **5.4. The need for teaching expertise**

A number of participants, both students and staff, recognised the important role played by the Foundation tutor, bringing together the multi-faceted approach, and being the ‘face’ of the programmes for students, from orientation through their transition into Diploma level study. In addition to a firm grasp of the principles of English as a Second or Other Language (ESOL) teaching, negotiation, consultation and flexibility were key. It was extremely important that the Foundation tutor was able to forge strong working relationships with the Diploma tutors:

*I think the tutor you have doing the IFP programme is absolutely crucial. I strongly believe that. It's not just about doing the programme, you can get someone who just goes through the motions, turns up to class but you need someone like [Foundation tutor], she is absolutely passionate and determined to improve these students' English. So, the way it happened was, we had meetings with the tutors and asked them to give real examples, terminology, show us some assessments to see what it's going to look like, what sort of writing style they prefer and some examples so she can work it into her course. It's not just running some foundation course, it's actually mindfully thinking about where they are going to go in the future. (International manager)*

#### **5.5. Challenges and issues**

Interestingly, the concerns which appeared to be top-of-mind differed considerably between the students and the staff participants. Both Foundation and Diploma tutors expressed unease about the persistence of plagiarism in class work and assignments, the reliance on rote learning and re-working model answers, and the lack of time spent studying outside class. It should be noted that these issues are common issues with many international students and are not specific to IFP students. In contrast, students were keen to give feedback about programme structure and the need for study breaks. Some found the Diploma maths difficult, and would have liked more preparation, but this was not a universal challenge. There was a lot of discussion in all three student focus groups about the variance they saw between their expectations of the programme prior to arrival, and their actual experience. These challenges and issues are explored in further detail below.

##### *5.5.1. Plagiarism*

Members of the research team had noted anecdotal comments from colleagues across the organisation that plagiarism is one of the major issues when tutors discuss international students' work. This concern was substantiated during interviews with participating staff. All four Diploma tutors interviewed identified plagiarism as an ongoing issue with both IFP and direct entry international students, despite research, paraphrasing and incorporating source material having been a strong focus in Foundation classes.

IFP students told us that they had been taught useful strategies in order to acknowledge other authors' work, and avoid plagiarism, but that it was still very challenging:

*It is very hard and very different ... we understand [that] we must re-write [sources' information] in our own words. (DE student)*

Several students said that plagiarism was an unknown concept in their culture; they were used to copying directly from their information sources, encouraged to depend upon rote learning and unquestioning acceptance of the information and opinions of the ‘experts’ in the prescribed text-

books. This position certainly aligns with that noted in literature arguing that plagiarism is a culturally-based concept which considerably disadvantages students from non-Western educational traditions (Adiningrum & Kutieleh, 2011) that emphasise communal ownership over individual thought. Devlin (2006) reports studies indicating that this is a growing problem, occurring right through from Foundation to post-graduate level studies; clearly our students were the norm, rather than an exception here. While the IFP students were still finding it difficult to make the transition to a Western referencing approach to academic writing, they were at least aware of the requirements as a result of their IFP experience:

*The IFP students were aware of the repercussions, why we reference and what the outcomes of plagiarising would be...what we do not see as acceptable here, whereas the direct entry students were not so clear. (Learning Advisor)*

### 5.5.2. Independent thinking and learning

The differences in learning styles between India and New Zealand that seem to feed into an initial dependence upon plagiarising were also represented in the types of thinking and pro-active learning that needed to be developed for success in New Zealand:

*They didn't want to be an independent learner. They wanted you to tell them what to do, and then they'd do it, because that was the way they had learned before – so that shift was huge. The whole concept of 'what does learning mean, and what do you do with it? Why are we doing this?' – All had to be very clearly modelled in every single lesson, in every subject. (IFP Foundation tutor)*

This is a hard shift to make. Students told us they valued learning tools which suggest the continued focus on a 'right' answer: step-by-step examples, model answers, lists of terminology and formulae.

### 5.5.3. Perception one only has to turn up to class

The expectation that students are required to study independently and effectively outside the classroom was problematic for both the IFP and direct entry cohorts. When asked their study patterns, most of the international students in this evaluation, including the IFP students, did not complete their required home study, despite some low scores and resubmits for many of their assessments:

*I talked individually with all students who didn't pass early tests and workshops. The resonant answer was they hadn't studied; they do not understand this is a part of the course ... They thought they could just rock up to class, and that was enough. (Diploma tutor)*

*I didn't know that if I didn't pass a paper, I had to repeat it and pay it again, this is difficult for me and not what we do in India. (IFP student)*

### 5.5.4. Maths

There was some disagreement among the IFP students about the value of the mathematics bridging course based on their prior knowledge and study, and some thought it was unnecessary:

*I think the maths is fine because I did it in India in my Diploma, so I am okay. (IFP student)*

*... at the beginning, very very easy – what are they teaching us maths? Why why why?! (IFP student)*

but those who did find it useful, said it was critical to their successful transition into their Diploma programme, and even then, it was difficult:

*Maths is really the hardest, it's not what we study in India, so the bridging programme was really good and maybe could be longer because now maths*

*is hard for us, and one of the tutor's accents is difficult. But we are passing.*  
(IFP student)

*We should be able to have another opportunity to pass the maths because we cannot do it so well because we didn't learn it before here.* (IFP student)

#### 5.5.5. Duration of the IFP programme

The different lengths of the IFP programmes, due to enrolment and semester start dates, had some impact upon the students' experiences and possibly their overall academic and linguistic development. One cohort had a twelve-week course; the next one had a seventeen-week course with a one-week break in the middle; the final cohort had a fourteen-week course with no break in the middle, and also no rest before entering the two-week maths bridging programme, which then led directly into the Diploma study. The international team noted that those who had no break became very tired and sometimes sick, and a student comment supports this observation:

*The Foundation classes were very long days so it was hard work sometimes, we only had a 30 minute break. We had to get everything done before our real study started; this was good but so hard to concentrate.* (IFP student – February intake).

#### 5.5.6. Misconceptions about the programmes they were enrolling in

Participants were asked to comment on their perceptions around the expectations they had prior to commencing their chosen course of study, and their actual experience. Areas addressed concerned the level of study and the students' ability to cope with the academic demands, the balance of practical and theoretical content, and whether the qualification they had chosen to undertake met their expectation.

Many of the students agreed that the Diploma subjects were harder than expected and the pass grades quite difficult to achieve:

*Maybe we could learn more about how difficult it will be in our engineering course before we start it; the passing marks are higher than I expected them to be.* (IFP student)

Tutors also recognised their students' surprise at what their programme actually entailed:

*Their impression of their engineering was very different to what they were expecting. I ended up getting the tutor to come in and explain what they were going to meet in their L6 class – talking about their expectations. The students wanted to learn kinaesthetic skills to take back to work, hands on, in their fathers' garages, to further the family business ... They weren't prepared for the amount of paperwork they would have to do.* (Foundation tutor)

Some students, however, were pleasantly surprised that the different systems in New Zealand (including a number of smaller assignments rather than a single summative exam, group assignments and re-sits) made study easier. Several also noted that the similarity of the subject specific terminology was a help:

*Some of the tasks we do here are easier – freehand drawing, and in India, we had to do another system. Might have felt better, not so scared about doing the course here if we could know that it was not going to be too hard, the work, not the language.* (IFP student)

A number of informants from all groups referred to the important role agents play in the lives of international students and their families, and the need for them to be fully informed and paint an accurate picture of what students would be encountering in the classroom. Misconceptions about programme content, level and objectives can lead to withdrawal, non-achievement, or re-enrolment in alternative programmes – when places are available. Such outcomes are highly stressful

for the student, require a lot of extra work for the international team, represent a financial loss for the provider, and reduce overseas agents' faith in the programme and organisation. One of the IFP students in this evaluation was directly affected:

*There is a lot of trouble for me because I didn't know about my course very well and when I entered it, it was so hard (the language and the content) and I had spent so much money and I ended up having to change because it's not what I thought my course would be so I changed to mechanical engineering so I could cope. (IFP student)*

Naturally, many of these issues and challenges outlined above pertain to a large number of international students, and are not limited to the IFP experience alone. However, for these students tasked with making a significant leap forward in their language and learning to match the skill set of direct entry counterparts, every difficulty adds to the pressure they are under. As several participants, both students and staff noted, it is not easy to settle and study in a new country. The success of the IFP students is a testament to their character and commitment.

## 6. Discussion

The course completion data showed that the international foundation pathway students performed as well in their diploma-level courses as did the direct entry international students. In eight of their courses, all of the IFP students passed. In the two "fundamentals" courses, IFP students performed slightly better than the direct entry students. It is likely that the work they had done in their foundation courses had assisted them with these two courses. However, the differences between the two groups were not significant. These outcomes indicate that the international foundation pathway students who had an IELTS of 5.5 were not disadvantaged in their diploma-level study compared to direct entry students who started with an IELTS of 6.0.

The performance of both groups of students in the two civil engineering courses was very poor. However, both the civil and mechanical diploma tutors reported that despite some 'stars', grades were lower across the board for the class than in previous semesters. It is important to recognise that this was so for all three groups of students (IFP, direct entry, and domestic) and that it was not any one group of students underperforming compared to previous cohorts.

Overall, both the IFP students and the associated staff felt that students had developed socially and culturally during their IFP programme, and that in these areas enjoyed an advantage compared with the direct entry students. As found in similar studies, the socialisation aspect was important (Baker et al., 2018; Fraser & Simpson, 2012; Ramsey et al., 2007), as was the content covered:

*I love to be here, the opportunities are very many. (IFP student)*

*I felt very good after the Foundation course because then I could know all about the college campus, how to write reports and assignments and many things. (IFP student)*

*It helped me to communicate, I could speed up my speaking and listening got better. (IFP student)*

*I liked the social science because I like to learn about NZ. And I can learn other vocabulary. (IFP student)*

Every IFP student who took part in the evaluation rated the IFP programme as 'very useful' in preparing them for their diploma programme, and all staff found value in the programme and its scaffolded approach (Wilson & Devereux, 2014). However, as one tutor cautions, the final results do not show the extensive amount of additional support time and resources that has been absorbed by these students – both by the diploma delivery teams and by academic and international support staff, or the higher rate of assignment resubmissions required, compared with the other groups. Nonetheless, with this enabling help available from the sidelines (McDougall et al., 2012), and

these students aware of where to go for assistance, and motivated to persist, they have been able to achieve success, even in language-rich subjects such as legislation and tender processes.

Alongside this overall success, the evaluation did identify a number of persistent educational, linguistic and cultural challenges, as described above, and which also reflect issues discussed in the literature (e.g. Baker et al., 2018). All students need time to familiarise themselves with their surroundings, their classrooms, academic expectations and classmates, but for international students, it is widely recognised that this is more likely to take longer and present other difficulties than those experienced by domestic students (Arkoudis et al., 2010; AU SSE, 2014; Deloitte, 2008; Fraser & Simpson, 2012).

The evaluation also highlighted the difference between some of the study skills which epitomise India's and New Zealand's tertiary sectors. Learning to be a critical and reflective thinker has been acknowledged in the literature as one of the most difficult shifts for many international students, and one which will likely take the lifetime of the qualification study to achieve (Arkoudis et al., 2010; AUSSE, 2010). As students in this study struggled to understand what was required to participate in class and demonstrate understanding, there was a tendency to fall back into the habit of 'cut-and-paste' research, despite spending time in the IFP programme learning to use and cite source material more acceptably. Plagiarism, it would appear, is a deeply entrenched cultural practice (Adiningrum & Kutieleh, 2011), and perhaps a coping mechanism, which was going to require more than a few weeks to overturn.

A final point to note is that during the research process, other issues not directly related to the evaluation, but which nonetheless are of valid concern going forward, were identified. An important consideration for the organisation is our responsibility to make sure that agents receive up-to-date programme and other study-related information, and are doing a good job presenting our programmes realistically to potential students.

## 7. Study limitations

While the response rate of 75% of IFP students who accepted the invitation to participate in the study was excellent, actual numbers were small, with only 15 IFP students and 10 direct entry classmates participating in the study. The outcomes offered here must therefore be viewed as a vignette of a number of individuals' experiences and perceptions, rather than a means to predict the outcomes for future intakes of students should the pathway programme is offered in the future.

Further, within the sample population, students represented three different cohorts, and attended Foundation studies courses which varied in length from 12 to 17 weeks. The Foundation studies tutors were also continually tweaking content and delivery approaches, to address feedback from IFP students and suggestions from Diploma tutors.

Consequently, details of the Foundation courses, as well as the length of time which had expired between course completion and the evaluation interviews/focus groups, differed within the participant pool. Data analysis and reporting was undertaken with this in mind; as far as possible, highlights and challenges noted have discounted issues which pertained to only one or two students in favour of more generalisable points.

## 8. Conclusion

*I would definitely do this course again, I think all the students would do this if they come from another country.* (IFP student)

The well-worn cliché that it takes a village to raise a child is highly applicable to this context. The success of the IFP students during the semester of the study has been due to all roles involved working in unison, from institutional leadership in concept development, to the input of the international team, then the Foundation tutors, managers and support team members, and finally the Diploma tutors. The IFP students have been well-supported and made to feel they matter; an early



concern by a member of the international team that the students with a lower IELTS, allowed to enrol under special circumstances, might feel themselves to be in some way ‘second-class citizens’ never eventuated. In fact, these students were proud of their pathway and enjoyed being in a position to assist direct-entry classmates who were struggling to fit in and find their way around.

The two objectives for this evaluation were to determine the success of the IFP programmes for students as preparation for Diploma level study, and to compare the outcomes for the IFP students with those of their international classmates.

From this research it is clear that the IFP programme greatly assisted every participating student in the transition from entering a new country, adapting to a new culture, adjusting to different learning styles and getting a feel for life as a Diploma level student. Students valued the study skills they gained during the Foundation part of their programme, and felt confident and prepared to engage in their Diploma courses. Observations offered by teachers, the learning facilitator and International Centre staff supported the students’ positive perceptions of the IFP approach.

From the interview and focus group data, it appears as if the IFP students adapted quicker, or at least equally fast to using English for study purposes in the classroom as did the direct entry international students. This is despite entering Diploma studies with an IELTS 5.5, rather than IELTS 6.0. The course outcomes data indicate IFP students’ academic achievement is on par with direct entry students, with only minor academic success differences apparent, suggesting that the IFP programme has achieved its aim of fast-tracking students who were close to the stipulated IELTS entry grade, but who would previously have been denied a place in the class.

The case study research approach used in this study works by incorporating the all-important multiple perspectives of those most directly affected by the project. The collation of participants’ viewpoints offered here therefore provides a starting point for understanding and interpreting the less tangible elements in a context which will not be apparent through final outcomes data alone. The information and insights contributed have, we hope, established a strong base for future decision-making about IFP programmes, as well as transferable good practice. While the study outlined in this paper is inevitably sited in a specific milieu, it is hoped that the learning around critical success factors for supporting international students, especially those who on first glance may not be the ‘right’ ones (!), will be broadly applicable beyond the original setting.

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