



The New Zealand Universities Academic Audit Unit
Te Wahanga Tatari Kaute Tohungatanga o nga Whare Wananga o Aotearoa

Memorandum to:	Committee on International Policy, New Zealand Vice-Chancellors' Committee
From:	Director, New Zealand Universities Academic Audit Unit
Date:	3 August 2005

**First round of compliance audits of universities against the
*Code of practice for the pastoral care of international students***

Background

In 2003, the Ministry of Education asked the New Zealand Universities' Academic Unit to monitor the compliance of universities with respect to the *Code of practice for the pastoral care of international students*. This request was made after consultation with, and with the support of, the New Zealand Vice-Chancellors' Committee. In April 2003, I met with the Committee on International Policy of the New Zealand Vice-Chancellors' Committee to discuss a process for the compliance audit. Subsequent to the meeting, a process was determined after considering feedback from the universities. Four of the compliance audits were completed in 2003; three were completed in 2004 and the last one was administered in early 2005.

In February 2004, after four of the universities had been audited, I was invited by the Centre for Continuing Education at the University of Canterbury (with responsibilities for English Language and Foundation courses) to make a presentation about the *Code* and to report on issues that were arising from discussions with staff and students during the audit process. The presentation did not identify the universities. At that presentation, I noted that the four remaining audits might well raise other issues, and it was suggested that once all eight universities had been audited, there could be interest in knowing of the range of issues discussed across the sector.

I talked about this with Jim Sinclair towards the end of the first round of compliance audits, and we decided that it might be appropriate to address such a report on findings to the Committee on International Policy of the New Zealand Vice-Chancellors' Committee for their information.

Scope of this report

This report is *not* about the extent of compliance against the *Code*. All universities regard the *Code* as being consistent with the way universities have been working to provide pastoral care for international students for many years prior to the introduction of the *Code*. Any 'non-compliances' were of a minor nature, and arose mostly from an interpretation of the *Code* and, for later audits, from the extra requirements placed on providers arising from the review of the *Code* in 2003 with effect 2004.

The purpose of this report is to record the issues of pastoral care raised in discussions with staff and students and to share them with all universities. This summary report intentionally

does not identify universities. I recognise that this report is based on my conversations with small groups of students and staff and that the issues raised may be very specific to the individual groups. There were, however, a number of issues that recurred across the sector which suggested to me that if they are of concern to a small sample of students and staff in a number of universities, they may also be of concern to a larger number of people in each institution. I recognise that issues may already have been made known to the universities by students and staff and were being repeated to me, and that the universities may be attending to them.

Issues raised

The overall quality of service

- Overall, students who had been at universities for several years were happy to acknowledge that there had been marked improvements in the quality and relevance of support offered to students by international offices. This reflects well on the sector.

The New Zealand experience

- Students in all universities remarked that their time at a New Zealand university had been positive and had been rewarding beyond the acquisition of qualifications.
- There were, however, suggestions made that the information provided to students before they arrived in New Zealand did not make clear enough the range of cultures within New Zealand. The tendency to emphasise the pakeha-Māori mix was understood, but when students settle down in New Zealand, they find the society to be much more complex than they had imagined, with a diversity of cultures in New Zealand.
- Requests were made for more information prior to arrival in New Zealand about life in New Zealand outside of study. Students recognise that they come to New Zealand to study, but they also want to live a life outside of the university.
- Universities encourage international students to mix with New Zealanders and experience something of the 'Kiwi' culture. International students report, however, that New Zealand students tend to keep to themselves and it can be difficult for international students to make friends with New Zealand students.

Websites

- Universities are well aware that most students make first contact with the universities through their websites. In discussions on site, I was told by students that they also appreciate receiving printed materials which many regard as the official communication. This raises two issues.
 - * Websites must be kept up-to-date. I found examples where websites contained out-of-date information, or contradictory information where, for example, details referring to one matter were in two parts of the website but only one of them had been updated.
 - * Printed materials are important sources of information for students and are kept by them for reference.
- Related to the use of websites versus printed material is the need to balance the provision of full information with the provision of too much information leading to 'information overload'. On the one hand, I was given evidence to show that some students do not bother to read everything, and then use that as an excuse for being

unaware of proper procedure. On the other hand, I gained from my discussions with students that most students are responsible people who retain for future reference those publications that appear to them to be comprehensive, and that tell them who to see as well as what to do when problems arise.

- I gained the impression that students look on the website for the information they want, whereas comprehensive publications present them with all the information they need to read at some time.
- Obviously it is for each university to determine the most appropriate and effective way to market itself. My point is that while the universities appreciate that their websites are the most important 'shop windows', universities should also appreciate that publications may be indispensable to students in the longer term.

Recruitment agents

- Some students reported delays in responses from recruitment agents. I also heard of cases where information given by agents was incorrect or incomplete, particularly in the area of prerequisites required for entry into advancing courses/papers. For example, a student beginning study at a university in semester 2 asked about a prerequisite requirement for a semester 1 course which was normally offered only in semester 1 and was told by the agent that something would be arranged for her on arrival at the university. On arrival at the university, it was made clear to the student (and the student accepted the reasons given) that a special arrangement was not possible, and that the prerequisite would have to be passed the following semester 1. This required a further semester of study at the university - and a further (unbudgeted) semester of fees and accommodation costs.
- Recruitment agents should either give correct information, or refer the students to the university for clarification of academic matters.

Costs

- It is natural that costs should be a recurring theme, and that increases in fees should be raised by students. I am aware that some universities have moved to strike an annual fee on entry that will remain set for those students during the duration of their programmes of study. Students understand that universities must cover costs, and their concern was as much with the communication (or perceived lack of communication) about fee increases as with the fee increases themselves. In essence, students prefer to know what they must expect with respect to fees and costs, and they are sensitive to the way fee increases (and other cost increases) are communicated. Not all international students are wealthy, and they all need to plan their expenses in an informed manner.
- There were repeated calls that the cost of accommodation outside of halls of residence, and the cost-of-living in New Zealand beyond that of basic survival, was not clearly stated. In general, it was thought that the cost of living suggested by universities was unrealistic. This is a difficult issue to resolve: to set the costs too low can require students to reconsider their budgets on arrival; to set them too high can make New Zealand appear to be a less attractive place to study.
- Costs related to the change to insurance requirements arising from the review of the *Code* in 2003 was an issue for those students already in New Zealand prior to the revision of the *Code*, and for those students who had purchased insurance in their home country to be told on arrival that their insurance was not 'appropriate' in terms of the universities' interpretation of the *Code*. It was obviously of concern to the universities

who were placed in a difficult position; hopefully clear indications of insurance requirements on websites and in publications will lessen students' concerns.

Workload

- It is necessary to be enrolled as a full-time student to gain a student study permit. It was pointed out in discussion with staff that it was a pity that immigration regulations did not provide for students who struggle with full time study to reduce their load, continue study as part-time students, and thereby have a greater chance of success in all they enrol.

(Comment: A question that arises from this observation is whether students who struggle with full time study may be lacking in preparation for academic study in New Zealand, and whether such students have attended courses that prepare them for University study. Of course it is still possible for students who are well prepared to find University study difficult, and it might be preferable to reduce enrolment to part-time if that were legally possible – which it is not!)

Staff

- Students appreciate the genuine attempts by staff to listen to and to assist international students. There were reports from students, however, where it would be helpful if there could be a greater staff awareness of the presence in class of students for whom English is not their first language.

Support services for international students

- The service, support and mentoring offered by international centres was appreciated throughout the sector. There were, however, three specific suggestions made for improvement, all of which may already be operating in some universities:
 - * the possibility of an international student liaison student in each class that contains a large number or high proportion of international students so as to facilitate communication between staff and international students,
 - * the possibility of ensuring there are people employed in some capacity within the international centres and the halls of residence who speak the languages of students,
 - * the possibility of setting up formal buddy systems with new students able to be assigned to more senior students to assist with settling in beyond the formal orientation.

Leaving New Zealand

- I was told of presentations and seminars available to students at the end of their stay in New Zealand, which discussed ways students can prepare themselves for their return to their home countries. Clearly the extent to which students view their return is coloured by the culture and academic environment from which they come. For some, the return will be easy; for some, however, New Zealand society and way of living is very different to their earlier experiences, and for some there is apprehension about their return home. A suggestion made was that assistance might be sought from university alumni associations and personnel in the home countries in assisting students during the early days of their return from New Zealand.

A matter outside of the *Code*

Curriculum

- Students in some disciplines reported that there was a concentration on New Zealand examples in lectures. The students understood that the majority of students were New Zealanders and that for those students, the use of New Zealand examples was an appropriate way to lead them into the theory of the subject. The point raised by international students was that international students did not always find it easy to understand the New Zealand examples and would have welcome some international examples as well, so as to help lead them to the theory of the subject. In their view, the universities welcomed international students, but the course content did not always reflect an international perspective.
- Some students in disciplines where Māori terms were used often asked that those terms be clearly interpreted for international students who were not as familiar with such terms as are New Zealand students.

Matters referred to the Ministry of Education

Several matters raised by staff and students were forwarded to Jim Sinclair, Administrator of the *Code* for the Ministry of Education. Jim Sinclair replied (significantly summarised below!) to the points raised.

- The Code requires all students to take out an ‘appropriate’ medical insurance. What is the Ministry’s interpretation of ‘appropriate’?

Jim Sinclair

The Universities have the right and responsibility to determine what they consider to be ‘appropriate’, and the students must abide by that. What might be appropriate insurance for international students will depend on their particular situations. Education providers vary considerably, and different students have different needs; thus it is considered best for the education provider to decide what is appropriate insurance. The main concern is to ensure that international students who come to New Zealand to study are well informed, safe and properly cared for.

- Does the Code apply to students on academic exchanges from other countries who are studying academic courses for credit back to their home university?

Jim Sinclair

There is a difference between ‘exchange’ and Government Approved Reciprocal Exchange Programmes. Students on Government Approved Reciprocal Exchange Programmes are deemed domestic students and therefore do not come under the Code. However, universities usually treat these students as if the Code applied. The Code applies to all other ‘exchange’ students.

- If an international student enrolls at a university and is married and the spouse joins the student in New Zealand, or if an international student marries while in New Zealand, does the *Code* place any obligations on the university with respect to the emotional and social welfare of the spouse who may have little or no knowledge of English and have little way of integrating into New Zealand society?

Jim Sinclair

The Code applies only to the student, not to any spouse unless the spouse is also a student. Please note the recent Government announcement of scholarships for PhD students, the children of whom will not have to pay fees to attend school. It

is Jim Sinclair's view that the Code protections would still apply, and he is seeking an opinion on this.

- If an international student has children attending a New Zealand school, does that New Zealand school have to be signed up to the *Code* and therefore subject to all of the requirements of the *Code* with respect to pastoral care, even though the children are living with their own families?

Jim Sinclair

Yes.

- It is possible for a group of students from an international provider to work through an agent, and the agent can be the main negotiator between the university and the provider (and therefore the students). The agent arranges for services such as travel and supervision of the group. Under the *Code*, students have to be made aware by the university of their tuition fees, but sometimes an agent is reluctant to be explicit to the international provider and students about the amount the University is charging for tuition. The agents, in this case, are agents for the international provider and students, not the university, and some agents do not allow communication between the international provider/students and the university. Therefore the university is unable to inform students about costs of tuition and all other course-related costs. Is it possible to extend the definition of 'Recruitment agent' to include agents acting on behalf of international providers/groups of students, thus placing the responsibility for identifying the costs of the university's tuition on the agent?

Jim Sinclair

It is recommended that universities consult legal advisors to clarify agency relationships and agreements to ensure that enrolled international students enjoy the protections of the Code. It is assumed that a signatory's agents (suppliers) would be bound by the provisions of the Code.

In situations where an agency approaches a provider to take a group and the agency pays a fee to the provider for such a service, and the students attend but are not enrolled with the university, it would be in the provider's interests to have determined clearly:

- * *to whom the university is providing the service (agency or students?),*
- * *to whom a student would take a grievance.*

Next audit

In conversation with Jim Sinclair, I have suggested that from October 2005, this Unit carries out a paper and web-based audit, asking for those publications sent to students who wish to enrol from semester 1, 2006, and evaluating the publications and websites to assure ourselves that the universities are providing the information as required by the *Code*. There would be no site visits. If I had any concerns, I would talk them through with the university, presumably with the international office, or with whoever each university considers most appropriate.

My thanks to the universities

I should like to express my thanks to all New Zealand universities for the co-operation in the compliance audit exercise, and to the international offices for their complete co-operation.

John M Jennings

Director

3 August 2005