

*DIVERSITY AS A PRODUCTIVE RESOURCE: EMPLOYMENT OF
IMMIGRANTS FROM NON-ENGLISH-SPEAKING BACKGROUNDS
IN NEW ZEALAND*

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Abstract

The past decade has been marked by increasing diversity in the New Zealand population, principally as the result of a more open immigration policy that aims to build human capital by targeting skilled, qualified immigrants, whatever their countries of origin. To what extent is effective use being made of the abilities and understandings of new settlers to help meet New Zealand's economic and social development objectives? This paper draws on the results of two studies conducted as part of Massey University's New Settlers Programme. These studies examine the employment and deployment of immigrants from countries where English is not the main language in New Zealand companies and government organisations, and identify workplace policies and practices that appear to maximise or minimise the economic and social contributions of immigrant employees. The paper concludes with suggestions on a social policy framework that might better meet the needs of immigrants and increase their opportunities to achieve their productive potential.

INTRODUCTION

In the context of moves in the past decade to increase the numbers of skilled immigrants and add to New Zealand's human capital, this paper examines the extent to which companies and government organisations make productive use of immigrant resources. The results of two recent studies of the employment and deployment of immigrants from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB) in New Zealand are used to identify workplace policies and practices which promote or inhibit effective utilisation of the talents of immigrant employees. It will be argued that there are policy deficiencies in both the private and public sector that have handicapped the ability of immigrants to achieve their full potential and, hence, New Zealand's ability to benefit from immigrant resources in terms of meeting the nation's desired economic and social development objectives.

BACKGROUND

The primary aim of New Zealand's more open immigration policies during the past decade has been economic growth, coupled (since 1995) with the maintenance of the society's high level of social cohesion (Trlin 1997). Four objectives are associated with this overarching goal: build New Zealand's human capital by increasing the skill levels in the workforce; strengthen international linkages at government, corporate, community and individual levels; encourage enterprise and innovation by bringing in people with vision and a desire to succeed; and maintain social cohesion while increasing New Zealand's diversity and vitality (New Zealand Immigration Service 1995b:3). These objectives are no less relevant today in the context of the drive towards the development of a knowledge-based economy, defined by Frederick et al. (1999:1) as an economy based upon "...human ingenuity and skill and a commitment to innovation through research and development".

The concept that diversity leads to economic growth and adds richness to social life also underpins Australia's immigration and settlement policies. The "productive diversity" strategy, which has been adopted to capitalise on the inflow of people from a wide variety of countries, involves establishing programmes aimed at developing awareness amongst employers of the advantages of a multi-cultural workforce and communicating ways in which this diversity might be more effectively harnessed (Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs 1998a, 1999). Australian firms are encouraged to draw on the diverse language skills, cultural insights and perspectives of their employees. Through negotiation of differences, an organisation's repertoire of skills, knowledge and understandings is increased, creativity is released, important synergies are created, and a "diversity dividend" is gained (Cope and Kalantzis 1997:170). This, it is argued, has particular relevance to organisations with a diverse clientele and better places them to understand and respond to the complexities of dealing with clients from varied cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The productive diversity strategy, then, focuses on the dynamics of managing diversity and rejects a "culture-as-sameness" paradigm in favour of "the productive paradox of cohesion-in-diversity" (Cope and Kalantzis 1997:17).

The extent to which New Zealand firms and organisations are, in similar fashion, capitalising on immigrant diversity will be examined via two surveys that form part of the New Settlers Programme¹ (NSP), a multi-disciplinary research project designed and conducted mainly by Massey University staff. The general aim of the NSP is to contribute to the attainment of three broad, interrelated outcomes:

- The development of a balanced, well integrated institutional structure of immigration (see Trlin 1993 for a definition and discussion);

¹ The New Settlers Programme, of which the research reported in this paper is a part, is supported by the Foundation for Research, Science and Technology with a grant from the Public Good Science Fund.

- A reduction in the difficulties experienced by immigrants in the process of settlement; and
- An increase in the benefits accruing to New Zealand from its targeted immigration programmes.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The two studies investigate the ways in which immigrant resources, in particular linguistic and cultural competence, are utilised in New Zealand. Non-English language skills and an understanding of other cultures are unique features of the human capital that NESB immigrants bring to a host country. These attributes have received increasing attention for their potential to enhance international business opportunities (Crocombe et al. 1991, Kipp et al. 1995, Stanley et al. 1990, Watts 1994), and to serve growing ethnic community needs. The two surveys comprise: (a) a two-part survey of the employment and deployment of NESB immigrants in companies engaged in international business, trade and tourism; and (b) a survey of the employment and deployment of NESB immigrants in central and local government organisations and the service provision for NESB communities that these organisations make.

Companies' Survey

Four hundred and sixty New Zealand companies involved in international business dealings received a 42-item postal questionnaire in July 1998². One hundred and eighty-seven completed questionnaires were returned – a 41% response rate. Follow-up interviews were held with 19 of these companies, selected on the basis of demonstrating innovative ways of using immigrant language resources, to obtain best practice data. In the second part of the study, a postal survey was carried out in September-October 1998 amongst NESB immigrants who had recently gained tertiary-level New Zealand business qualifications to ascertain their perceptions of employment policies and practices. One hundred and fifty-six graduates received questionnaires³. Fifty-two completed questionnaires were returned by the due date, a response rate of 41%.

² The companies were targeted on the basis of information concerning their involvement in non-English speaking markets provided in the *New Zealand Export Yearbook 1998* (Profile Publishing Ltd 1998), the *New Zealand Trade Directory 1998-99* (Current Pacific Ltd 1998), and the *Travel Industry Directory and Information Guide 1998* (T.P.L. Media 1998).

³ Access to this group was gained through the cooperation of the Alumni Associations of the University of Auckland and Massey University with some extra assistance provided by the Federation of Ethnic Councils.

Government Organisations' Survey

Organisations included in this study comprised both central government (departments, ministries, Crown entities) and local government organisations (regional, city and district councils). A 46-item postal questionnaire was received by 321 of these public sector organisations in February-March 1999⁴; 157 questionnaires were returned by the cut-off date, a response rate of 49%. Follow-up interviews were conducted in April-May 1999 with 16 of the organisations that made innovative use of NESB immigrant employee resources and were delivering a range of language-related services for NESB clients.

FINDINGS ON POLICIES REGARDING IMMIGRANT EMPLOYMENT

The 187 participating companies comprised two main groups of equal size: exporting companies (88) and firms involved in tourism (88). The remaining 11 companies formed a miscellaneous group engaged in a variety of international business dealings ranging from banking to consultancy. Only 21 of the participating companies (11.2%) reported an explicit policy concerning the recruitment of NESB immigrants with the percentage varying across the categories ("tourism" 14.8%, "exporting" and "other" categories 8% and 9.1%, respectively). Policies on employing NESB immigrants included: the primary importance of appointing the best applicants; and special recruitment provision for particular positions that cannot be filled locally because the skills sought are in short supply or because the positions require a blend of work experience and linguistic or cultural competence not easily found in New Zealand.

Only 8.3% of the participating central (95) and local (62) organisations reported the existence of explicit policies regarding the employment of immigrants, the percentage being much higher among those in central (12.6%) rather than local (1.6%) government. Recruitment policy guidelines emphasised the importance of getting people with the best mix of skills, qualifications and experience for positions advertised. However, some policies recognised that certain positions are more appropriately filled by people with an ability to communicate directly with particular ethnic groups. Equal Employment Opportunities (EEO) provisions were expected to be followed in the appointment and deployment of staff as well as in the establishment of workplace measures to combat discrimination and harassment. A small number of organisations, notably those operating in areas with large concentrations of people with non-European backgrounds, saw a need

⁴ These included: (a) central government organisations listed in *The New Zealand Government Directory 1999* (Network Communications 1999), and public health providers included in *The Health and Disability Sector in New Zealand: A Directory* (Ministry of Health 1998); and (b) regional, city and district councils listed in *A Directory of Local Government in New Zealand* (Department of Internal Affairs 1997).

for affirmative action to bring staffing profiles more in line with the composition of the client base.

UTILISATION OF IMMIGRANT RESOURCES

Similar themes on the utilisation of immigrant resources emerged from the two surveys. The findings from the companies and from the government organisations are presented separately below.

Companies' Findings

Of the 187 participating companies, 130 (69.5%) reported having NESB immigrants in their workforce. The main languages of these immigrants were Chinese languages/dialects, Japanese, Samoan and German. Ninety-seven companies (74.6%) indicated that some use was made of such immigrant-employee native-language skills for work-related purposes. Utilisation of these skills was much more evident in the "tourism" (91.9%) than the "exporting" companies (55.2%), despite the fact that Asia and Europe featured as major trading regions for the latter group.

Use of the cultural competence of NESB immigrant employees was even less common. Only 55 companies (42.3%) signalled that they utilised the cultural knowledge of their immigrant employees – 59.7% of "tourism" companies, compared with 25.9% in the "exporting" category.

Similarly, a mere 38 companies (29.2%) indicated use of the overseas contacts and networks of NESB immigrant employees (32.3% of those in the "tourism" category and 29.3% in the "exporting" category). This finding is somewhat surprising as many of the skilled immigrants in recent years have had considerable work experience in their countries of origin and are likely to have developed useful personal links in the business sector.

The primary aim of the second part of the study, the survey of NESB immigrants who had recently gained tertiary-level New Zealand qualifications, was to gain information on company policies and practices from the perspective of the immigrants themselves. The 52 respondents were mainly males, aged less than 40 years, and of Asian ethnicity. Most had been resident for more than five years and all had completed New Zealand tertiary-level business qualifications (usually between 1994 and 1998), three-quarters with Masters' degrees or above. The majority also had gained business-related work experience before coming to New Zealand.

Given this work experience and their New Zealand qualifications, it could reasonably be expected that they would have little difficulty in obtaining employment in New Zealand organisations or in setting up their own businesses. This was not the case. At the time of the survey, 11 (21.2%) were unemployed and there were individual cases of underemployment – such as a person with an overseas Bachelor of Engineering and a New Zealand Executive MBA, who was managing a dairy/superette.

Forty-eight of the 52 respondents classed themselves as native speakers of one or more languages other than English, with just over half speaking a Chinese language/dialect. Twenty-eight of those employed indicated that they made some use of their native-speaker skills at work, but the reported use of these skills was only up to three times a month in the majority of cases. Fourteen reported that their cultural backgrounds were useful at work, while only seven reported use of their business connections in their employment.

In answers to open-ended questions the respondents made a number of criticisms of what they perceived as the wastage of NESB immigrant resources. They felt strongly that their potential to contribute was overlooked by employers. For example, one respondent was of the opinion that:

“If in the past my world view had been recognised, my employers would be far better off. Two or more language skills present opportunities, which a single language skill does not.”

They also drew attention to a range of problems that impeded the utilisation of their skills. Included among these problems were an apparent reluctance by many New Zealanders to adjust to the new immigration environment, widespread negative attitudes towards people from different cultures and discrimination. In each case the difficulty noted or problem encountered echoed those reported in other studies of recent skilled and business immigrants in New Zealand (Boyer 1996, Department of Internal Affairs 1996, Forsythe Research 1998, Lidgard 1996) and/or mentioned by recent skilled Chinese immigrants included in the New Settlers Programme longitudinal study. With reference to the latter group, as a measure of the effect of the problems encountered, it may be noted that: (a) at the time of the first interview, typically within six months of taking up residence, only seven of the 36 Chinese participants (19.4%) were in either full- or part-time employment (including self-employment); and (b) a year later, although their situation had improved, only 13 (36.1%) were in some form of employment (Henderson et al. 1999:14-17).

Government Organisations' Findings

Many of the themes that emerged concerning the utilisation of NESB immigrant resources in New Zealand companies were also found in the survey of government organisations.

Of the 157 participating organisations, 101 (64.3%) reported that they had NESB immigrants in their workforce: 65 (68.4%) of the 95 central government organisations compared with 36 (58.1%) of the 62 local government organisations. As far as their native languages were concerned, Pacific Islands languages (particularly Samoan and Tongan) featured highly, along with Indian languages/dialects (Hindi, Gujarati, Punjabi etc.), and Chinese languages/dialects (Cantonese, Taiwanese, Mandarin etc.). Dutch was the most prominent of the European languages. But less than half (49.5%) of the organisations reported that their NESB immigrant employees used their native languages at work in some way. Greater use of such skills was noted in central (63.1%) as compared with local (25.0%) government organisations. Furthermore, of the 101 participating organisations employing NESB immigrants, only 26 (25.7%) reported that they made use of the cultural backgrounds of their employees in some way. These were almost exclusively central government organisations, particularly those involved in the social welfare, health and justice areas.

The second part of the study was directed at determining the kinds of language-related services provided by the organisations for NESB clients and the extent to which these services involved the participation of their NESB employees. Two key findings emerged. First, 73 organisations (46.5%) reported that they provided translation or interpreting facilities for their clients. Again, this was primarily a feature of those in central (56) rather than local (17) government. In general, when interpreters or translators were required, the participating organisations indicated a tendency to contract in outside personnel rather than make use of their own staff. Second, 54 organisations (34.4%) reported that they provided material for clients in languages other than English or Māori. Here also these were predominantly in central (46) rather than local (eight) government. However, 12 organisations admitted that there was a demand for written information in different languages that they were unable to meet, principally because of a lack of resources.

FINDINGS ON BEST PRACTICE FEATURES

From the companies and government organisations included in the two studies, a small sub-group in each was selected for follow-up interviews. On the basis of these interviews the following best practice features were identified.

Explicit Policies and Procedures

Best practice in NESB immigrant recruitment and appointment involves the development of explicit policies that identify the advantages that immigrants might bring to a company or organisation. The policies also set out procedures for settling NESB immigrants effectively into the workforce. Consideration is given to the fact that some might require additional training or retraining to make better use of their skills and qualities in the New Zealand work environment. Procedures are outlined in policies for providing this support.

Personal Assistance (Pre-arrival, On Arrival and Later)

Best practice in the pre-arrival period involves making personal contact with potential immigrants in their countries of origin, providing them with accurate information about employment and living conditions in New Zealand, and assisting them in completing immigration formalities. Effective on-arrival assistance involves greeting immigrants, placing them into suitable accommodation, helping them to choose schools for their children and facilitating their contact with community networks (including links with other members of their ethnic group). Depending on the circumstances, best practice follow-up assistance could include providing access to English language courses or to professional or vocational courses that could help the immigrants in their employment.

Involvement in the Company/Organisation Culture

Best practice in integrating immigrants into the company/organisation involves induction programmes that focus on their needs and which provide them with knowledge and understanding of the company/organisation culture. Recent immigrants may also be called upon to contribute to staff development programmes that aim to increase the multi-cultural and multi-lingual awareness of staff and help them become more aware of issues related to their work amongst people of different backgrounds.

Identification and Recognition of Immigrant Linguistic Skills

The competence of immigrant employees in languages other than English is identified in human resource records. This listing is used as a reference point when interpreting/translating needs arise. Abilities in languages relevant to the operations of the company/organisation are recognised through a rewards system, particularly if use of these abilities falls outside of normal duties.

Effective Use of Linguistic Skills and Cultural Knowledge

Native speakers of other languages are encouraged to maintain or extend their fluency and gain qualifications as translators or interpreters. Consideration is given to training selected individuals to take up specialist positions in the company/organisation where their linguistic and cultural competence could be used to better advantage. Efforts are made to match staff who possess native speaker skills in certain languages with clients who are speakers of those languages.

Provision of Services for Immigrant Populations

Best practice shown by organisations with particular responsibilities for providing services within New Zealand includes:

- data collection on the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of clients, combined with close attention to demographic trends and changes to assist with forward planning;
- provision of competent, qualified interpreters where clients have difficulties communicating in English;
- provision of documentation in the main languages used by NESB client groups;
- consultation with NESB communities on issues which could impact on their cultural sensitivities; and
- monitoring the effectiveness of service provision via feedback from NESB clients⁵.

KEY FACTORS IN THE PROMOTION OF PRODUCTIVE DIVERSITY

Current immigration policy emphasises the importance of adding to the nation's human capital by attracting skilled, well qualified people (New Zealand Immigration Service 1995a, 1995b). However, the results of the two studies reported above suggest that there are barriers to the participation of NESB immigrants that limit their ability to contribute productively. In this context, four key factors in the promotion of productive diversity in the workplace are identified and discussed below.

Recognition of the Reality of Diversity

A pre-requisite for productive diversity is the acknowledgement that diversity actually exists. It would appear, on the basis of the survey responses, that such recognition cannot be assumed as a given. While some companies and organisations recognised in their policies and practices the multi-cultural makeup of their workforce, others appeared to view their staff as primarily homogeneous – embodying similar ways of thinking, feeling and acting. Furthermore, a number of companies appeared to overlook the diversity in

⁵ For further details concerning the results of the two surveys, see Watts and Trlin (1999, 2000).

their customer base, in respect to both the domestic and international markets. There was a tendency to perpetuate myths that all people can speak English and that they are familiar with Western values, beliefs and customs.

View of Diversity as an Advantage

The surveys also showed conflicting views on the value of diversity. Again, there were differences between those companies/organisations that considered diversity a source of valuable insights and expertise that could be drawn upon to provide competitive advantages and opportunities and others which overlooked these assets or associated diversity with dangers and threats. Furthermore, attitudes and prejudices undoubtedly play a part in determining whether or not use is made of the resources available. Regrettably, there were companies and organisations that tended to prefer native-born New Zealanders rather than people from other backgrounds in matters of recruitment or promotion. Immigrants are acutely aware of such cultural biases (see Basnayake 1999, Henderson et al. 1999).

Establishing a Workplace Culture that Fosters Productive Diversity

Productive diversity is more likely to flourish in a workplace culture that is inclusive and affirming, and that encourages the input of people from different backgrounds. A common element in the best practice features identified was a commitment at managerial level to fully involve NESB immigrant employees in company/organisation activities and to educate other staff on the value of their contributions.

Maintenance of a Social Climate Conducive to Productive Diversity

On the wider front, productive diversity is more likely to be attained if new immigrants have positive settlement experiences. All sectors have a major role in this: central government agencies, business, local authorities, as well as ethnic networks, family connections and voluntary groups in the local community.

SOCIAL POLICY IMPLICATIONS

A strong, knowledge-based economy depends on a citizenship that is well educated, skilled, hard-working and creative. All available human resources, imported as well as native, must be recognised, developed and utilised to their full potential. This cannot occur if skilled immigrants have limited opportunities to participate fully. Here, economic considerations link with issues of social justice and equity. Immigrants should not have

to face social or institutional barriers that reduce their potential to contribute as residents or citizens, whether this is discrimination in employment, inequitable access to services or a lack of support to meet specific needs. In other words, the development and effective implementation of appropriate social policy are essential to the optimum realisation of NESB immigrant resources. In this respect, there is an urgent imperative for action in at least three policy areas.

Monitoring and Implementation of Equal Opportunities

While legislation exists with respect to the provision of equal employment opportunities, EEO must be monitored more effectively to ensure that compliance is not perfunctory but carried out in a positive manner. This involves large-scale, proactive programmes to educate employers and administrators on the advantages of a multi-cultural workforce. They should be encouraged: to identify positions which require particular blends of linguistic and cultural competencies not normally found in the native-born population; and to institute measures to increase the participation rate of people with these attributes.

Building Partnerships

The effective monitoring and implementation of EEO in turn suggest a closer partnership between business, government and the community to promote the value of productive diversity. A possible promotional model may be found in Victoria (Australia), where a concerted campaign has been mounted to draw popular attention to the advantages of diversity for increasing exports and productivity and improving client services. This is a combined effort drawing on government, business and education sectors as well as the ethnic communities themselves (see Employment Victoria 1998).

Providing a Comprehensive, Coordinated Settlement Programme

Finally, productive diversity depends on the existence of an infrastructure that assists immigrants to settle smoothly into the host society. Timely, appropriate assistance in the immediate post-arrival period is crucial; if needs are not met at this stage (including access/entry to appropriate employment), the effects may be long-lasting and detrimental to both the individual and society in general (see North et al. 1999, Trlin and Henderson 1999, Trlin et al. 1999). The sooner immigrants are helped to settle in the new environment, the sooner New Zealand will gain the benefits of their skills and abilities. But this requires coordinated planning to achieve a balanced, well integrated institutional structure of immigration (see Trlin 1993). The Race Relations Conciliator criticises the present situation where: "... new arrivals are largely left on their own to make a transition to life in New Zealand" (Office of the Race Relations Conciliator 1998:l0) and adds:

As a country we need to develop a much more comprehensive programme to assist new migrants to settle. Such a programme should make English language classes readily available. Other settlement services should be offered to new settlers as well as the communities in which they settle.

Government agencies must, then, consider carefully their policies and protocols for dealing with NESB immigrant needs. Although some public sector organisations may have developed their own codes and protocols relating to the provision of culturally responsive services (e.g. Department of Social Welfare 1996), overall there is an absence of integrated top-level policies that could provide a consistent approach to addressing the requirements of new settlers with different linguistic or cultural backgrounds. In this respect, policies and practices in New Zealand lag well behind those in Australia where considerably more attention has been paid to immigrant access and equity issues. For example, the Australian Charter of Public Service in a Culturally Diverse Society (Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs 1998b), endorsed by the Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments and the Australian Local Government Association, is based on the seven principles of access, equity, communication, responsiveness, effectiveness, efficiency and accountability.

Urgent consideration needs to be given to a similar, comprehensive social policy framework in New Zealand. On the basis of best practice examples identified in the survey of companies and organisations reported in this paper, this framework should include guidelines on the following:

- Gathering accurate information about client groups and their particular linguistic and cultural backgrounds;
- Identifying the special needs of NESB clients;
- Developing appropriate programmes and services to meet these needs;
- Ensuring that NESB clients have equitable access to relevant information in their own languages and to interpreting and translation services;
- Training staff to deal sensitively with people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds;
- Recruiting staff with skills in immigrant languages and contacts with ethnic communities;
- Developing databases of staff with these skills and recognising and rewarding them for use of such skills; and
- Setting in place mechanisms to monitor the appropriateness and effectiveness of the services provided for NESB clients.

CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed some of the ways in which companies and organisations have responded to New Zealand's growing cultural diversity. The argument has been made that there are deficiencies in the effective management of this diversity and wastage of the talents of many of the skilled NESB immigrants who have arrived in recent years. Needless to say, the sooner the issues identified in this paper are tackled, the sooner will New Zealand achieve: (a) a reduction in the settlement difficulties experienced by immigrants; and (b) an increase in the benefits accruing from its targeted immigration programmes.

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