



# From Asia to Australia

*Annie Facchinetti*

**D**id you know that Australia is the third most popular destination in the world for tertiary students wishing to study overseas (OECD, 2012)? The trend is also extending to primary and secondary school education. In June 2014, more than 14,000 students from overseas were enrolled in our primary and secondary schools, with more than half these students coming from China and Vietnam (Australian Government Department of Education, 2014).

A combination of a culture that values education highly and increased competition for limited university places makes international study an attractive option for many Asian students. Dr Samuel Cheng, Principal of the Tsung Tsin Christian Academy, a Hong Kong secondary school, explains that in Hong Kong, these imperatives are reinforced by the fact that there has been a recent change to the Diploma of Secondary Education (DSE). "Because the DSE is just a new system ...I can see not only in my school but also in some good DSS

schools [semi-private Direct Subsidy Scheme Schools] ...more students quit high school and go overseas for high schooling because they do not have confidence in taking the DSE exam... teachers do not have full confidence, students do not have full confidence. Parents will say if I am sending them out when they are finishing DSE, why not send them out earlier?"

Tsung Tsin is one of around 150 schools in Hong Kong that offer English Medium Instruction [EMI] classes. Principal Cheng says that parents see EMI schools as a better choice that will bring their children higher academic results. All core subjects are conducted in English, but using the local curriculum.

Competition to get into Tsung Tsin is fierce. The school is not allowed to use written exams during the formal enrolment process, but instead requires students to submit a portfolio and then attend an interview as part of their selection procedures. The portfolio includes information about academic performance, extra-curricular activities such as music, sport

or dance, and other information about their school achievements. "We need students with good English, and we put weighting on the conduct grade, because we want students with self discipline [who] will follow instructions, and in our system that will be reflected in the conduct grade," Principal Cheng notes. Students whose conduct grade in primary school is not up to scratch are given the chance to explain the reasons for this during the interview.

The school has around 700 students from Grade 7 to Grade 12, 90 per cent of whom will go onto some form of further study. Statistics suggest that due to the shortage of university places on offer in Hong Kong, last year 13,000 students were not offered a place at a government-funded university in the country, almost half of those who were eligible (Lai, S, 2013). This translates to government-funded places for just 18 per cent of the teenage population as against an OECD average of 68 per cent.

It is no surprise then that many students turn to overseas study as a viable option. Schools





Samuel Cheng

like Tsung Tsin Christian Academy are popular because they can help prepare students to seek an international tertiary placing. Principal Cheng cites the support that students are given to prepare for the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) exam as an example of this. IELTS results are used as an entry requirement by more than 9000 institutions worldwide (IELTS, n.d.), including many in Australia, and a school that can provide assistance to prepare for the exam is seen as giving students an edge.

The school also organises information seminars run by agents who specialise in finding international positions for secondary and tertiary students and supporting the students to make the transition to overseas study. Agents can help both parents and students with a range of decisions and issues, including which country to go to, which courses to choose, where to study and how to handle some of the common problems associated with choosing to study abroad.

Cynthia Law has worked with Principal Cheng and Tsung Tsin students for a number of years. As a Deputy Director at Brisbane based City Smart Consultants, her work has included facilitating arrangements for many Hong Kong students seeking study opportunities in Australia. Law is particularly conscious of the importance of matching the young person to the right course at the right institution. "It's the prime time for them to be studying and if you go to the wrong place or you choose a not as suitable course, it's just three to five years that's

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completely gone and it's a shame – and a very expensive mistake, especially for international students," she says.

Irene Kwok, a Director at City Smart Consultants, explains that both time and care are put into identifying the right opportunity for each student. "At times families are unaware of the choices on offer," she says. "Being able to meet with them in person and better understand the student is an important step to matching them with a suitable course to reach their goal. A student's ability to succeed in the chosen course is not just based on their academic results. We believe it is important to understand their character and nature."

Law knows that the decision to study overseas can be challenging for both parents and students. It is critical that young people understand that they are being sent overseas to further their education and not, as Law suggests they sometimes feel, so that their parents can get rid of them or be free to go on holidays when they want. There can also be a perception that only students who fail to get tertiary positions in Hong Kong study abroad, so part of Law's role is to ensure that everyone understands that Australian institutions offer high quality courses and that it can be a top choice to go overseas. This work is supported at schools such as Tsung

Tsin by career masters who help students to explore the range of opportunities available to them.

For parents, the concerns are often quite different. "It is hard letting go," says Law. "[The child has] been part of their lives 24/7 and to have them go overseas, their house is quite empty for most of the year and it is an adjustment not just for the student but also for the parents as well. So when we do pre-departures and when we meet with the student, we like the student and the families to come along together because it's hard." Managing the expectations of all parties is key to a successful international study experience. As Law notes, students need to be prepared to embrace the differences. "It's a new environment, it's supposed to be different. Don't criticise it because of the fact that it's different. If you can't overcome that hurdle, you will never be happy anywhere you go."

The majority of students assisted by City Smart Consultants live with homestay families, at least initially. "We have found that this is often a good arrangement as it will be the first time that students have lived away from home. Some students may choose to reside in dormitories. After the students have settled in and/or when they have made some new friends, they may choose to rent or share accommodation with others," Kwok says.

City Smart offers on going support to its clients placed overseas in a number of ways. Student counsellors make contact with new arrivals to ensure they are settling in well, and are available if any problems arise. City





*International students at Mercedes College, Adelaide*



Smart also helps with issues such as visa extensions and referrals to tutors if there are study difficulties. On a social level, students are encouraged to participate in organised events. “We will also arrange activities for our students during certain festivals (e.g. Chinese New Year, Christmas, Mid-Autumn Festival),” Kwok notes. “This is a good opportunity for students to make new friends and we are able to provide a bit of an ‘extended family’ while they are away from home.”

At the other end of the process are the educational institutions attended by the international students. Leanne Moriarty is the International Marketing Coordinator for Mercedes College, a Catholic, Foundation to year 12 school in Adelaide. Of the College’s 1230 students, 45 are from overseas, with most coming from China, Hong Kong and Germany. “To promote the school and attract the students, we attend expos and exhibitions in a range of countries in Asia and Europe, we sign up education agents in countries to help promote us and we visit a wide range of countries and cities to support the agents,” Moriarty explains. Representatives from the school also attend seminars at schools overseas, support Austrade promotional visits and participate in familiarisation visits for agents to the school.

The school offers the International Baccalaureate in Years 11 and 12, although students can opt to complete the South Australian Certificate of Education. International students who attend Mercedes College are supported in

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a number of ways. The school organises family homestay accommodation to provide students with a stable environment from which to attend school. Specially tailored English language support programs and free after school study skills classes also help to ensure that students make a smooth transition to their new environment.

Interestingly, despite the fact that Mercedes College actively promotes itself as a destination for international students, Moriarty reveals that, “It is our school’s policy to only enrol a small number of students from a wide range of countries.” This is likely to sit well with prospective students for whom, both Principal Cheng and Cynthia Law observe, the number of international students in the class is a critical issue. “The whole point of sending them overseas is so they can increase their English ability along with getting a [good education] so the international to domestic student ratio is a concern,” Law says.

About half of the international students at Mercedes College stay on to complete tertiary studies in Australia, while the other 50 per cent study in countries such as USA, the UK or Japan. Indeed, USA and the UK are the two countries that outrank Australia for their ability to attract international students. Principal

Cheng explains, “If you want to find a very traditional long history school – university or high school – you would choose UK... if you check the statistics UK is still number one for Hong Kong parents.”

Yet he, himself, chose Australia as the destination for tertiary study for his two boys. “For university students, I may say if you want to find some modern schools, I would choose Australia... If you see the advantage of it, it’s a modern university, they have technology, they have everything with no bearing or loading of history.”

***Note: Principal Cheng has just taken up a new position as principal of United Christian College in Kowloon East.***

#### **Further reading**

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OECD (2012), *Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators 2012- Australia*. Available from: <http://www.oecd.org/australia/EAG2012%20-%20Country%20note%20-%20Australia.pdf>. Accessed 10 August 2014.

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