

New insights into a Cook Islands 'brain drain'

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Victoria University of Wellington student Lea Raymond is gaining new insights into a Cook Islands "brain drain", as part of her Master of Development Studies.

Lea's research seeks to understand why Cook Islanders choose to study abroad and how their tertiary education overseas affects the development of their home country. This research is part of a broader project—Education, Migration and Development in the Pacific Islands—led by Professor John Overton. It is supported by the Marsden Fund, which is managed by the Royal Society of New Zealand.

Lea became interested in the motivations of Cook Islanders travelling overseas to study through her family connections.

"My husband is a New Zealand-born Cook Islander and his parents and extended family are back in the islands. I was chatting with them last year and we got on to the issue of studying overseas and the pros and cons of returning home.

"On the one hand, you can earn so much more if you live and work overseas after you graduate. And there's the appeal of seeing the world—it's not all that different to the Kiwi OE.

"But, on the other hand, these graduates have an enormous amount to offer the Cook Islands if they return, in terms of the country's development.

"In some ways, you could almost talk in terms of a Cook Islands diaspora. There are fewer than 20,000 people living in the islands but more than 60,000 Cook Islanders living in New Zealand alone, to say nothing of Australia. Many of these people are university-educated, so there's a real issue for the islands about how to attract these graduates home to use their education to benefit the country."

To investigate the motivations of Cook Islanders studying overseas, Lea visited Rarotonga in June, interviewing people who had studied overseas and subsequently returned home.

Lea says her Pacific-based research method—known as talanoa—aims to create a free-flowing conversation between her and the participants on a broad range of topics.

These topics include discussing how the participants view the concept of "development" of their home country; why they chose to study overseas; their experience of living and studying overseas; and why they chose to return to the Cook Islands, or remain in New Zealand.

"Talanoa is not all that different to a lot of Western interview techniques—it's about letting the interview develop organically, rather than trying to keep it fixed to a list of standardised questions. In fact, it likens the research process to weaving a flower garland. And it's fascinating how it helps people to open up about their experiences, since it's a Pacific cultural form."

Lea is about to embark on the next stage of her research, speaking to graduates who chose not to return home but stay in Wellington. She is looking for more participants and is keen to hear from any Cook Islanders living in Wellington, who graduated more than six months ago, and who travelled overseas specifically to study at university.

Provided by Victoria University

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