

WORKING IN WHANGANUI



Nikki Ni and Simon Zhang

Course

Nikki graduated with a Master of Environmental Engineering degree, University of Auckland in 2018.

Simon graduated with a Master of Engineering in Computer Systems Engineering degree, University of Auckland in 2018.

Work

Nikki works as and Environmental Engineer at Whanganui District Council.

Simon is working in the IT department at Whanganui District Council.

Why Whanganui?

“Whanganui chose me!” smiles Nikki Ni. Nikki moved to Whanganui to work for the Whanganui District Council’s water services team in mid-2019. Newly married to Simon Zhang, who she had met while studying, Nikki looked for work in regional New Zealand after struggling to find work in Auckland after graduating.

Nikki and Simon were attracted to New Zealand for several reasons. They had heard that New Zealand had friendly people, a mild climate, an environment free from pollution and a work culture that encourages workers to achieve work-life balance.

Simon cheerfully admits he did not know the difference between Whangarei and Whanganui before they moved here, but now they live in Whanganui, both Simon and Nikki like it very much. They enjoy the river, the historic feel of the city and love the fact that Whanganui people are so friendly. Nikki works in a small team and is already benefitting from work experiences that she may have had to wait for, or missed out on altogether, if she had stayed in Auckland.

Getting work ready

The couple wanted to work in New Zealand after their studies, as Nikki knows Chinese employers want workers with overseas experience. She knew

that working visa rules had changed in 2018 and that with their master's degrees the couple could apply to stay for 3 more years.

Once they had set their goal of working in New Zealand, Simon and Nikki made great use of the Career Development and Employability Services (CDES) team at their university. CDES ran a recruitment fair, held CV writing workshops and offered one-to-one CV feedback and interview training.

Even with all this help, Simon and Nikki found getting a job hard – Simon thinks he sent out over 300 applications and CVs. He wishes he had known back then that New Zealand companies expect a personalised cover letter, rather than the one size fits all letter he was using.

Simon and Nikki recommend that you get at least one of your professors to be a referee. A referee is someone who can answer any questions employers have about your skills, attitude and work habits.



Nikki Ni checking the 'Secondary clarifier' at a wastewater treatment plant

Nikki wishes she had started looking for work earlier. She started applying for jobs in October with only a few months of her course to go; she did not know that many students found their internships as early as May. These people were beginning work in January or February and at that time, Nikki and Simon were still looking.

Simon is now in full-time work in Whanganui too. When Nikki found work in Whanganui, Simon's search for work had to begin all over again. He eventually found some work selling door to door. This was a tough task, but Simon says it improved his understanding of the way New Zealanders talked to each other. Then Nikki's manager at the council suggested that Simon put his degree to use by volunteering to update the website of a local attraction, the Bason Botanic Gardens.

Simon gained confidence and valuable experience using his skills in the Kiwi workplace and it also helped him find full-time work with the IT department of the local council.

Life in the workplace

Nikki believes employers are not taking a risk when they employ someone on a post-study work visa, as international student graduates improve the diversity of their Kiwi workplaces and can help New Zealand businesses to expand their markets. Graduates from China can help their employer gain Chinese customers both here in New Zealand (in Auckland and Wellington in particular), and back in mainland China. The ability to explain local customs, speak the language and act as translators for their Kiwi colleagues, are all skills Nikki believes she can offer the Whanganui District Council, in addition to her environmental engineering skills.

Nikki and Simon had just spent Chinese New Year with relatives in Auckland when they were interviewed. Nikki was delighted that her manager not only gave her leave but also sent good wishes for the New Year. A potential bonus for employers of international graduates is the fact that many of the festivals and holidays from their home country fall at different times of the year to New Zealand holidays, so some international graduates will be happy to work during hard to staff New Zealand holiday periods.

Simon and Nikki are great examples to follow. When their first steps to meeting their goal weren't successful, they did not give up. Any employer would be lucky to have workers with their resilience, determination and willingness to try something new. Auckland's loss is definitely Whanganui's gain.



Simon with the 'Bason Botanic Gardens' website he designed

Top tips for jobseekers

- ▼ Start your job seeking early.
- ▼ Make sure your chosen course(s) of study will make you attractive to Kiwi employers.
- ▼ Make sure you find non-family people who are willing to act as your referee when you start applying for jobs (try a professor or community leader).
- ▼ Do not be discouraged if the job advertisement asks for some years of relevant experience. If Kiwi employers can't get the person they are looking for, they may settle for someone less experienced.
- ▼ Write a new CV and cover letter for each position. Simon says, "Remember to research where you want to work and find out the name of the person who will be looking through the applications."
- ▼ Be patient. Keep applying. It is hard to find a job here and the process is slower than you may be used to back home.

Top tips for employers

- ▼ Give us a buddy. Someone who is patient and is good at putting ideas into easy to understand words. Commonly used sayings can be confusing for international graduates. As Nikki says, "I got embarrassed when the HR manager at the council said 'Welcome on board' - he spoke so fast and I did not know what he meant - if he had slowed down and rephrased it to 'Welcome to the team', I would have understood and felt much better about my first day."
- ▼ Give us time to understand your accent. Nikki says, "I do have workmates who have strong New Zealand accents. At first, I could not understand them fully. I forced myself to talk to these workmates more. I have worked out that when they say words that sound like other words 'Read/Red' or 'Big/Bug', I will ask them to spell the word for me, and I will know, and remember forever."
- ▼ Give us a chance. Nikki says, "Employers need to understand that those of us who have grown up in overseas education systems, like the Chinese system, are hardworking and eager to learn. We are in competition with so many smart and talented people." Simon adds, "If you give us a chance we will put just as much, if not more, effort into the job than our Kiwi colleagues."