

Berufsfeld Neuseeländische Regierungsinstitutionen

Kirsten Maurer

Kirsten Maurer arrived in New Zealand in 2006, three months after she had finished her Magister degree at Leipzig University in Political Science, Spanish Studies and Economics. She had no job experience apart from two short internships in Spain and Germany and having been a student research assistant while studying. She has been working in the New Zealand public sector for four years. She has been employed with the Ministry of Social Development, New Zealand Trade and Enterprise, and the Ministry of Economic Development. Currently, she is contracting with Statistics New Zealand ("Statistikamt").

The public sector is Wellington's largest employer. As a city of only 450000 inhabitants, the chances of getting a job in a ministry are rather high, in particular, as many New Zealanders, also commonly called "Kiwis", prefer to work for the private sector. The good news for me as recent graduate was that foreigners are entitled to work in New Zealand's central government institutions without a citizenship or residence visa.

It took three months of applying, before I got my first job at the Ministry of Social Development (equivalent to "Sozialministerium"). It was an administrative role, as Customer Service Officer, with a focus on administering various international bilateral agreements of interstate pension transfers. After six months, a friend of mine made me aware of some vacant positions at New Zealand Trade and Enterprise (equivalent to "Aussenhandelskammer"). I applied and was offered a role as Grant Administrator for export funding. I stayed in the position for six months before I got internally promoted into a Business Advisor role. For almost two years, I advised businesses through an online web portal on good business practices, in particular in the areas of export, management and sustainable development. When the website was moved to the Ministry of Economic Development (equivalent to "Wirtschaftsministerium"), my team got reemployed there.

In 2010, I moved back to Germany for one year. It was an unexpected surprise that I was unable to find a German employer who would have valued my New Zealand job experience. I was pretty much without a qualified job for one year; an internship for the Leipzig City Council did not result in remunerated work which is why I returned to New Zealand in 2011. It took me three weeks to find new employment in Wellington.

Currently, I'm employed as a project manager by Statistics NZ (equivalent to "Statistikamt"). I'm responsible for developing a strategy for the future of the organisation's sustainable development work programme. I have chosen not to take up a permanent position but contract out my capacity. This is less secure than a permanent role as the contract rolls over every 3 months but very attractive from a financial point of view. A contractor with my background can earn approximately between 60000 and 100000 Euro per year.

From a German perspective, it might seem odd to change jobs almost once a year, however, in New Zealand the situation is a different. A qualification like a bachelor's or a master's degree is regarded as an entry ticket into a job. Even though you might have specialised in a certain field, an employer would focus on your transferable skills ("soft skill") when you have no job experience and employ you in a low position from where you can then quickly get promoted, if you do well. The situation is different for an experienced employee in terms of where you start, but the focus on transferable skill remains. In general, it's not your academic background that counts. Expertise is acquired by learning on the job. New Zealand employers upskill their employees continuously. It is part of your work package to attend courses (even at university level) and training to enable you to carry out your job

properly and grasp new opportunities. I, for example, attended several project management courses and completed a formal qualification which was crucial for getting into my current role.

Therefore, it is not too surprising that people with a variety of different backgrounds work in the government sector. In my team, I work with economists, historians, information scientists, ecologists, social scientists but also people with a music degree or no formal qualifications. For most of them, their work is unrelated to their degrees. I haven't met any political scientists but there are prone to be some. A master's degree is already a very high qualification in New Zealand, I estimate that only one out of 20 staff might have a masters. All the others will have a qualification on a bachelor's level or below. Kiwis graduate much earlier than Germans and join the workforce young. Someone my age (34) in New Zealand would have an average of 12 years of work experience, which is more than twice as much as I do.

I haven't really used much of the skills from my political science degree. Of course, I had a pretty good theoretical understanding of political systems when I joined the public sector. And I've benefited from the experience of having written numerous papers during my degree. My managers have always valued my high analytical skills and sound research techniques – something I definitely acquired as part of my "Magister". But as I've largely worked in operational roles rather than as a Policy Analyst there wasn't much chance to apply specific political science knowledge.

I regard my career as a mix of coincidence and good luck. I've several times happened to be in the right spot in the right moment and was lucky to know many people that have promoted my aspirations. Of course, I made sure to work for organisations that roughly lie in my field of interest like international trade, business, and international relations. But I would have never expected to be able to work again on sustainable development for a statistical agency.

I've never been able to apply my foreign language skills on the job (apart from English, obviously). In terms of internships, New Zealand was a bit of a surprise as Kiwis don't do internships, they don't even know exactly what an internship is. So I guess my internships weren't of too much use for my career. Good marks may play a role when someone tries to enter the public sector through one of the graduate programmes that many of the ministries run. They have a thorough selection process and only the best get in. The programmes train you up to become a Policy Analyst (in the case of Statistics NZ, a Statistical Analyst). The graduate programmes are a great way to getting familiar with the public sector but the people that join the programmes are very young, usually between 21 and 24, so age is definitely a selection criterion.

I've come to realise that the New Zealand and German job market are not very compatible. While subject matter expertise seems to rank high with German employers, in New Zealand it's all about work experience, and the preparedness to adapt and acquire new skills on the job. Both has its pros and cons.