

Through Pacific/*Pasifika* Lens to Understand Student's Experiences to Promote Success Within New Zealand Tertiary Environment

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Abstract

Traditionally, education environments are Eurocentric. They have reinforced “pedagogy of the oppressed” where Western knowledge is reflected in the university curriculum and ways of learning and teaching. Factors influencing success in learning remain an area of strong interest particularly in regard to non-traditional students in learning and teaching settings. This study explores the strategies undertaken by first, second, and third generation Pacific/*Pasifika* students to overcome challenges whilst studying and utilizing services provided by staff in the *Pasifika* Learning Village at the Auckland University of Technology in New Zealand. The study adopted a mixed method approach that was adapted by integrating a *Pasifika* method of *talanoa* to understand their experiences so that their voices and stories on how they made it through a tertiary environment are heard and valued. Through Pacific/*Pasifika* lens, a cultural analysis of Pacific/*Pasifika* students' knowledge, values, and beliefs highlighted that supplementary cultural spaces, Pacific/*Pasifika* staff support, and valuing and acknowledging the social space relationships are imperative factors empowering them to succeed in a New Zealand tertiary setting. This paper argues that cultural pedagogies integrated into mainstream revealed successes that warrant recognition as they have demonstrated that traditional models within contemporary settings empower and enhance Pacific/*Pasifika* students' success.

Keywords

Cultural lens, learning village, Pacific/*Pasifika*, *talanoa*, tertiary education

Much has been written about the challenging academic attainment of *Pasifika* students participating within the New Zealand (NZ) education setting. Given levels of academic performances, *Pasifika* students have been labelled as low achievers, underachievers, at risk, vulnerable, difficult to reach, and as non-traditional, and other (Airini et al. 2010: 82; Anae et al. 2002; Benseman et al. 2006; Fairbairn-Dunlop 2014; Mayeda et al. 2014; Nakhid 2006; Siteine 2010; Sopoaga et al. 2017). The outcome has been a positioning of *Pasifika* as a minority and underrepresented group at all levels within the

university whether as undergraduate, postgraduate, or as staff.

This paper argues that there are at least three contextual concerns perpetuating this inequity. First, there is a marked orientation of course content and processes to reflect Western or Eurocentric tradition. As argued by Chu, Abella, and Paurini (2013),

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successful *Pasifika* students situated within traditions, values, and beliefs contradictory to those of Western/Eurocentric traditions have to learn to navigate these competing ways of knowing. This leads to a second concern, for non-successful navigation results in low or non-achievement. Notably, 20 years ago, *Pasifika* students referred to their C grades as “C for coconuts” (PISAAC 1993). The “C” grade being metaphorically linked to how Pacific people believed they were perceived within NZ society. An expectation of low performance risks being internalised. A third concern, also linked to the first, is the orientation of education processes, being individualistic. An individualistic orientation promotes the “I” rather than the “we” of connectedness and collectiveness. Pushing back on such unacknowledged bias, Fairbairn-Dunlop (2014) reminded us that as educators, we need to explore *Pasifika* students’ educational experiences through a cultural lens. This paper therefore brings forward consideration for what we as educators might do better in designing and directing initiatives to enable *Pasifika* students’ successful navigation of university study without a need to compromise their own identity.

In this study, we explore factors both enabling and disabling of *Pasifika* students’ experiences while studying health disciplines within the Auckland University of Technology (AUT). To learn from, and to act on this information, we as educators might then promote and widen successful participation of *Pasifika* students in attaining academic qualifications. The study takes a Pacific/*Pasifika* methodological framework of *talanoa* to encourage “voice” and to tell stories that acknowledge a Pacific/*Pasifika* lens promoting cultural capital as an active agent in the tertiary educational environment.

A PACIFIC/PASIFIKA LENS

Chu et al. (2013) identified Pacific or *Pasifika* people

originating from the Oceania regions of the Polynesian, Micronesian, and Melanesian groups. Statistics New Zealand (2014) provided a more ethnic specific approach to these terms to describe the seven predominant groups residing in NZ which includes Samoa, Tonga, Cook Islands, Fiji, Niue, Tokelau, and Tuvalu. In various contexts (whether educational, health, or other disciplines), the terms Pacific/*Pasifika* are used interchangeably to suit the way in which researchers design methodologies or utilize it according to how participants self-identify (Fairbairn-Dunlop 2014; Ponton 2015). The Ministry of Education (2017) employed “*Pasifika*” term to describe people living in NZ who have migrated from the Pacific Islands or who identify with the Pacific Islands because of ancestry or heritage. Hence, *Pasifika* people do not refer to a single ethnicity, national, gender, or culture. For the purpose of this study, the term Pacific “signifies research relating directly to the Pacific region, while ‘*Pasifika*’ refers to the educational experiences of Pacific people residing in NZ” (Burnett 2012: 488). *Pasifika* terminology is used to describe the participants in this study. Conversely, “Pacific” is referred to representing a broader Oceanic perspective.

Those articulating a Pacific lens orient towards a “philosophical view that incorporates elements of Pacific culture and history” (Fairbairn-Dunlop, Nanai, and Ahio 2014: 82). This approach emphasizes links and relationships between nature and people, non-living as well as living things, as balanced (Tamasese Ta’isi 2007, as cited in Fairbairn-Dunlop et al. 2014: 82). It arises from the epistemological and metaphysical foundations of the spiritual, cultural, physical, social, and environmental elements that are the basis of Pacific knowledge, values, beliefs, and practices surrounding the physical environment/land that Pacific people depend on for survival (Pulotu-Endemann 2009; Suaalii-Sauni and Fulu-Aiolupotea 2014). These elements are interconnected, interdependent, and co-existing

through relationships known as the *vā* (social space). In order for harmonious relations to exist, Pacific communities have myriad time-honoured practices that nurture the *vā*. These include, but are not limited to, integrating aspects of “Pacific culture and history” such as reverence to God (sacred relationship) and connections to the land through customary tenure and maintaining “communal rather than individual responsibilities” (Fairbairn-Dunlop et al. 2014: 82-83). Many *Pasifika* families and individuals within their respective communities view the importance of incorporating spiritual, social, physical, economic, and cultural—*matai* (chiefly) systemic values as the sum of integrated values where one cannot exist without the other. Within these communities are “structured domains that outline gendered roles and expectations; behaviours that people are encouraged to adhere to for the general good of the family or family security” (Fairbairn-Dunlop et al. 2014: 83).

Anae’s (2010) “*teu-le-vā*” paradigm emphasized the special connections people have within Pacific communities, whereby certain principles are adhered to in order to maintain genuine, respectful methods of communication. “*Vā* is the space between, a betweenness, not empty space that separates but one that relates, holds separate entities and things together in the Unity-that-is-All, a space that gives meaning to things”¹ (Wendt 1999: 402). *Teu-le-vā* is not limited to familial ties, but encourages researchers and stakeholders wanting to work with Pacific peoples to engage in understanding the realm with which Pacific people are familiar. This provides a more constructive approach rather than the too often applied deficit model that positions *Pasifika* people as less able than others. Anae (2010) introduced this framework to the Ministry of Education (for example, see Airini et al. 2010) intended as a model to support the cultural nuances *Pasifika* students bring to the educational context (Ministry of Education 2017). Valuing the *vā* relationship requires an element of respect, an attribute highly valued within Pacific cultures, for

example, relationships between the young and elderly people and people deemed as having higher status including religious leaders and teachers. In Polynesian groups such as Tonga, Rotuma, and Tahiti, this social relational context is known as *vā*, while in Hawaii and Aotearoa/NZ, it is known as *wā* (Ka’ili 2005: 89). To cross the *vā/wā* is to transgress strongly held values of honour and respect. Knowledge of *vā/wā* goes some way to understanding relationships of *Pasifika* students within educational settings. Non-responsiveness in tutorials or question and answer sessions while positioned as a negative attribute in Western/Eurocentric understandings becomes mistaken for a lack of knowledge and in turn this reinforces the ubiquitous application of a deficit model for *Pasifika* students being embedded within a culture of silence. Such respect mistaken for silence results in a positioning of *Pasifika* students as non-responsive or difficult to engage (see for example, Lee Hang and Bell 2015).

The reference point of “*teu-le-vā*” “provides an essential and significant contribution to research praxis in highlighting the need for both parties in a relationship to value, nurture and, if necessary, a ‘tidy up’ of the spiritual, physical, cultural, social, psychological and tapu ‘spaces’ of human relationships” (as cited in Airini et al. 2010: 2). Many models have metaphorically presented the Pacific worldview providing robust counter arguments to the Western/Eurocentric knowledge of academia leading to a hope for cultural democracy (Durie 2007). Some prominent ones are the Tongan *fonua* and Samoan *fonofale* models respectively (Pulotu-Endemann 2009; Tu’itahi 2009)².

In an educational context, seeing Pacific knowledge as valid and valued has potential for rewriting a history that has positioned *Pasifika* students as less able through connecting in ways that are valued (Fairbairn-Dunlop 2014: 875). We would extend this further to include the importance for researchers in working in ways that similarly validate

Pacific ways of knowing and being. Over the last few years, there has been an increasing shift away from Western/Eurocentric ways of conducting research to a more inclusive Pacific centred research methodology (Naepi 2015). As such, strategies have been designed and implemented including *talanoa* (Farrelly and Nabobo-Baba 2014; Otunuku 2011; Prescott 2008; Vaioleti 2006), *ula* (Sauni 2011), *fa'afaletui* (Suaalii-Sauni and Fulu-Aiolupotea 2014), *kakala* (Thaman 1993), and the *vanua* framework (Chu et al. 2013; Nabobo-Baba 2008).

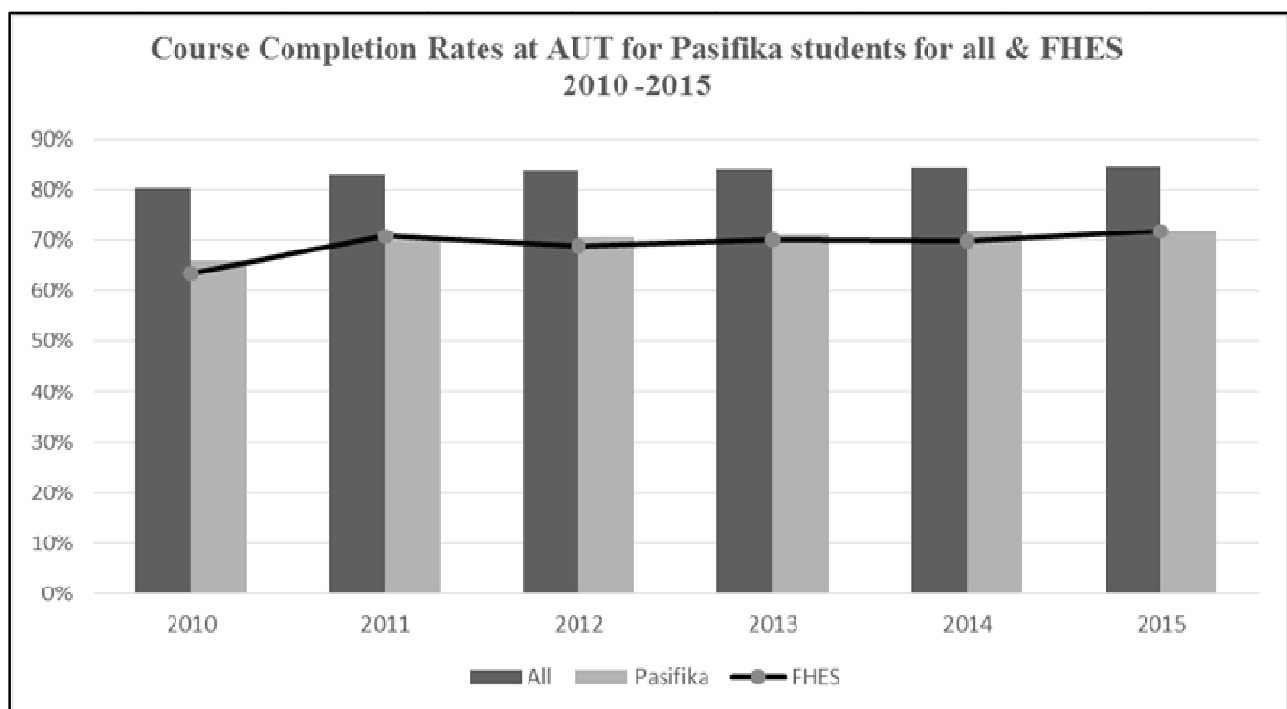
Understanding *talanoa* requires valuing of

diversity and difference; and accepts that social realities are experienced differently by others (Curtis 2016).

THIS STUDY

Context

At AUT, 80% of the *Pasifika* student population are enrolled in 20% of the courses. The course completion rates reported below (see Figure 1) are based on Education Performance Indicators (EPI) reported by



Year	Course Completion Rates	
	All	Pasifika
2010	80%	66%
2011	83%	70%
2012	84%	71%
2013	84%	71%
2014	85%	72%
2015	85%	72%

Figure 1. AUT Course Completion Rates (in %) for Pasifika Students Compared to All 2010-2015.

Note: Source: CCR—Course Completion Rates (2016) are calculated using Educational Performance data provided on workspace of Tertiary Education Commission.

Tertiary Education Commission (TEC). These outcomes identified that successful completions consistently flatlined during the 2010-2015. The gap remains on average 13% lower for *Pasifika* compared with all students. Similar performance trends are mirrored within the Faculty of Health and Environmental Sciences. An improvement from 2010 to 2011 may reflect a time when the faculty adopted a *Pasifika* Learning Village, an initiative prompted by the *Pasifika* Student Support services in collaboration with the Equity *Pasifika* Academic team. The initiative was piloted in Semester 2, 2008, and implemented in 2009 onwards. The trend though small, was positive. With TEC support, there was equity funding invested of \$ 30,000 in 2011 raised to \$ 70,000 NZ dollars from 2012 to 2015. However, internal processes of the university have altered how this money is directed and the *Pasifika* Learning Village model was a casualty of these changes.

Pasifika Learning Village

Recognizing the concerning performance of *Pasifika* students, the faculty established a *Pasifika* Learning Village initiative as an adaptation of Tinto's (1993) seminal work on learning communities. A learning village concept enabled co-construction of knowledge processes from a traditional setting where village people would discuss issues and create problem solving solutions for the betterment of their community, whether it was a Fijian, Samoan, Tongan, Cook Island, Hawaiian, Māori, or Vanuatu setting. The learning village was situated within the faculty by creating a physical space within a classroom context known as a *fono* (meeting) room. The *fono* room was intended to create a freely accessible positive learning environment for students to develop a sense of belonging. An additional intention was to facilitate *Pasifika* students in fostering their own learning and values collectively, to build trust relationships between senior and more recent to university study

students. And for *Pasifika* students to feel culturally safe, developing their own pedagogical ways of learning transferable within their own languages while developing enabling factors to benefit their learning. This was a strengths-based approach focusing on ways in which participants could do their best to maximize improvement and knowledge in educational settings.

This strategy undertaken by the faculty and *Pasifika* staff intended the nurturing of what Mila-Schaaf and Robinson (2010) coined as "polycultural capital", that is, recognizing the "ability to accumulate culturally diverse symbolic resources, negotiate between them and strategically deploy different cultural resources in contextually specific and advantageous ways" (Mila-Schaaf and Robinson 2010: 2).

Pacific in Aotearoa/NZ

Approximately 300,000 Pacific people live in NZ representing 7.4% of the total NZ population (Statistics New Zealand 2014). This group has the highest rapid growth of any other ethnic group in Aotearoa/NZ. The Ministry of Education (2017) projected that by 2025, the Pacific population will reach half a million (480,000). Like many diasporic communities, migration continues "to be a contemporary and on-going causal factor to the enlargement of a Pacific family's world and is usually driven by aspirations for a better life for the migrant and for those left behind" (Samu 2010: 5). Fairbairn-Dunlop and Makisi (2003) highlighted that such patterns of migration reflected family held aspirations including the desire for better educational opportunities for their children.

Samu (2010: 8) declared that "if education results in on-going culture crossings, then we need to examine the personal, lived experiences of education for the *Pasifika* second and third generations in NZ". On this premise, the ontological approach would be to

understand *Pasifika* students' journeys as told in their own voice, to capture their stories and narratives and to share these more widely with the intent of provoking thoughtfulness for what enables or disables. In doing so, this research applied a mixed method approach integrating a phenomenological approach for *Pasifika* students who had completed health courses at this university from the years 2010 to 2015. Eleven participants self-selected into the study. The study occurred in two phases. First, a qualitative online survey was used to gather general characteristics and responses to particular experiences. The second phase involved a qualitative pan-Pacific *talanoa* method fostering the "personal encounter where people story their issues, realities and aspirations to allow pure, real and authentic information" (Vaioleti 2006: 21).

Aims of the Study

This research explores the experiences of 11 *Pasifika* students enrolled within the faculty health programmes between 2010-2015, and this covers the time when the *Pasifika* Learning Village initiative was in place.

The main focusing question was: What are the experiences and challenges *Pasifika* students encountered while studying health related courses at AUT? A subset of questions then involved, and these included:

- (1) What does it feel to be a *Pasifika* in NZ and at AUT?
- (2) What are some of the reasons for them to partake in tertiary education studies?
- (3) What does success mean to them?
- (4) What do *Pasifika* students find engaging?
- (5) How did the *Pasifika* Learning Village initiative assist with their academic journeys?
- (6) What were some of the challenges and how did they overcome them?
- (7) What were best practices and successes as viewed by them?

RESEARCH APPROACH AND DESIGN

Indigenous scholars remind us that a culturally appropriate methodological framework and design is ethically imperative (Du Plessis and Fairbairn-Dunlop 2009; Fairbairn-Dunlop et al. 2014; Nabobo-Baba 2008; Smith 2004). This study merged a mixed method approach by incorporating elements of a *Pasifika* qualitative method of *talanoa* as well as quantitative measure in the data collection (Creswell 2014; Vaioleti 2006).

Talanoa as a research approach was undertaken to investigate the experiences and challenges *Pasifika* students encountered while studying health related courses at this university. This approach involves "an unstructured discussion process" focusing on developing relationships where the participant can "share stories, realities and aspirations" (Vaioleti 2006: 21). The emphasis on the relationship is common within Samoan, Tongan, and Fijian cultures where the social constructs of decision making and knowledge construction are understood.

The *talanoa* process of inquiry allows for researchers to work with participants enabling voice. The conversation can be "context specific" and can "serve different purposes" (Chu et al. 2013: 3). The researchers and participants, being *Pasifika*, are free to display cultural expressions, nuances, or use words in their own vernacular to express opinions, behaviours, or attitudes while upholding the values and beliefs that empower people. In this context, the researchers and the participants converse in a comfortable fashion with *mālie* (humour), *māfana* (warm) and so build relationship, while engaging in truthful and authentic dialogues (Farrelly and Nabobo-Baba 2014; Vaioleti 2006). Authenticity in this approach invites not only being heard but is about having the right to be present and grow in cultural spaces.

A further phase of this study involved quantitative measures gathered through an online survey tool. This method provided numerical data for statistical

comparisons. This information was then supported by *talanoa* supported stories triangulated against the statistical data and which was also seen as having resonated with educational practices experienced by equity team staff working in this area.

In the study by Chu et al. (2013), the analysis of several tertiary institutions (Polytechnic, Massey, Auckland, Victoria, and Otago University, excluding AUT) concluded that hindering factors on why *Pasifika* students do not appear to engage in tutorials involve their shyness. Lee Hang and Bell (2015) in studying Samoan science students noted a cultural aspect of silence as a sign of respect. To mitigate for silence, whether caused by shyness or respect, the initial research phase of online, anonymous survey provided a forum where *Pasifika* students had “voice”, and could be heard, while discouraging the culture of silence as highlighted in Lee Hang and Bell (2015).

Twining et al. (2017) provided a framework on reporting and analyzing data with a mixed method approach. As knowledge seekers, indigenous researchers need to analyze their participants’ ontological position—their beliefs about the nature of being or reality through their lived experiences as *Pasifika* health students. In this context, this involved how the participants highlight reasons for participating in a tertiary institution. Without being too chronological, Twining and colleagues also noted that the other stance is the participant’s epistemological stance, that is the beliefs they hold about the nature and scope of knowledge where meanings are culturally defined. This study examines the participants’ experiences based on their worldview. It is an interpretive activity involving considerable appreciation and respect for cultural representations with *Pasifika* researchers reflecting on and valuing the life experiences of *Pasifika* learners. In doing so, *Pasifika* knowledge systems are not only to be reclaimed, revalued, and revived but applied or integrated within our learning institutions.

PARTICIPANTS

Recruiting participants from the alumni of the university involved a “word of mouth” or snowballing technique commonly utilized in qualitative research (Silverman 2013). This is an approach that has also been utilized in cross cultural research (Liamputtong 2008) and is considered particularly relevant to access small and dispersed target groups and those deemed “difficult to reach” (Renzetti and Lee 1993).

With the online survey, a postgraduate student replied first. Then this person emailed the survey onto other graduates and so on and so forth. This word of mouth approach is familiar for *Pasifika*. Too often, *Pasifika* students are less visible within academic spaces, and this technique could capitalize on the buddy system network. Eleven participants engaged in the survey, while five agreed to participate within the in-depth group sessions within a *talanoa* framework. Those selected for this study were those who were enrolled between 2010-2015. As noted earlier, this period is strategic for this study when the faculty *Pasifika* initiative integrated specific intervention for *Pasifika* students. The University Ethics Committee granted approval for this study earlier in March 2017 recognizing the well detailed manner in which this research acknowledged the respect for the participants, minimizing power coercion between the approach in building relationship (*teu-le-vā*) with the participants as well as highlighting reciprocity in the research process, where the participants could review their transcripts and add or delete information gathered.

The following section provides a discussion of findings. First, a descriptive discussion on the demographic characteristics of the participants is highlighted, as these factors shed light on how some of the experiences and challenges are encountered.

Participants’ Profiles

The following information outlines participant profiles

providing perspective on participants' backgrounds as students in the health programs completed at this university. The student profiles below provide an indication of the participants' family and educational backgrounds.

All 11 participants had been enrolled in a health programme (see Figure 2). There were those who were enrolled in clinical programmes, for example, Nursing, Occupational Therapy, Physiotherapy, and Psychotherapy. Others studied Psychosocial and Public Health papers, for example, Health Promotion and Psychology, while one was enrolled within the Sports and Recreation papers. A few are currently enrolled in the Master of Health Science programme, expecting to complete in 2018.

All of the participants had taken the four core papers before specializing in their health disciplines. Figure 2 portrays the disparate programmes the participants were enrolled in which provide a valid and credible representative population of the *Pasifika* students who were enrolled in health. All of the participants self-identified as *Pasifika* while they were enrolled within this university (see Figure 3a). These ethnic backgrounds reflect the *Pasifika* composition of those residing in Aotearoa/NZ (Statistics New

Zealand 2014). This further enhances the reliability of the participant selection because it mirrors the national composition where their responses will add value to this study.

A majority of eight participants were of Samoan descent, a further two were Fijians (P6, P9), and one was identified as Tongan (P5) (see Figure 3a). The participants also specifically added particular information about their ethnicity. For one, although Samoan, he stipulated being originally from American Samoa (P4). Similarly, the Tongan student clarified both her Tongan and Samoan heritages (P5), while one Fijian explicitly noted he is Indo-Fijian (P6). This ethnic specific identification reiterates what Samu (2010) claimed that it is crucial not to assume that Pacific people are homogenous. The way the participants self-identified themselves demonstrates the diversity and unity amongst the *Pasifika* people. Figure 3b further reflected other demographics of those who are more NZ born as evident in the second and third migrant generation status. Only two Samoans were first generation migrants. A mixed group of the majority being second generation migrants were either Samoan, Tongan, or Fijian. As expected, all the Samoan participants were third

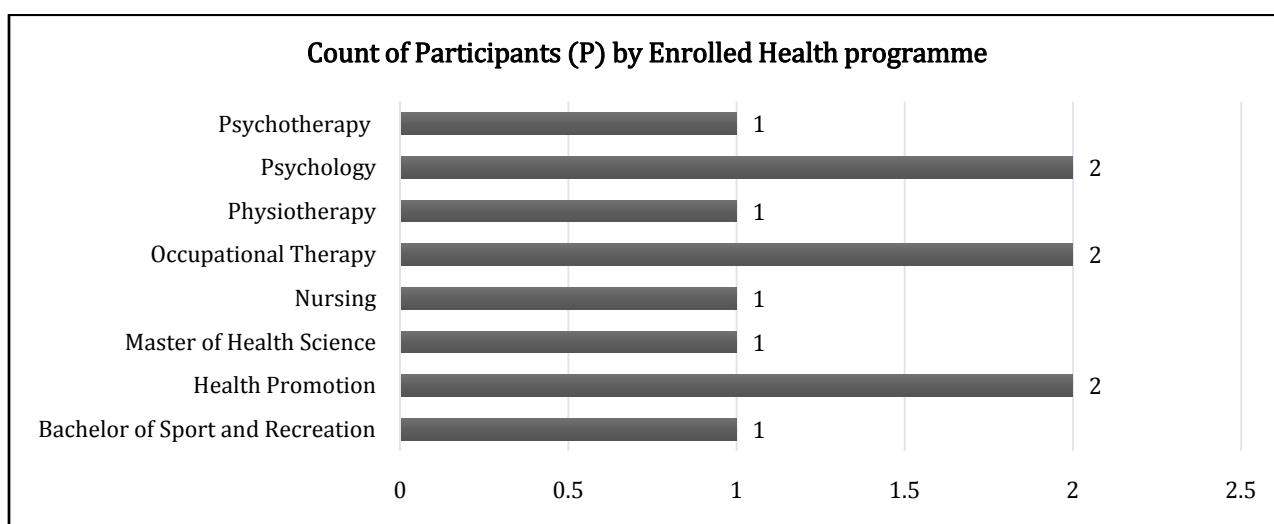


Figure 2. Self-identified Health Programmes the Pasifika Participants Were Enrolled in (2010-2015).

ETHNICITY

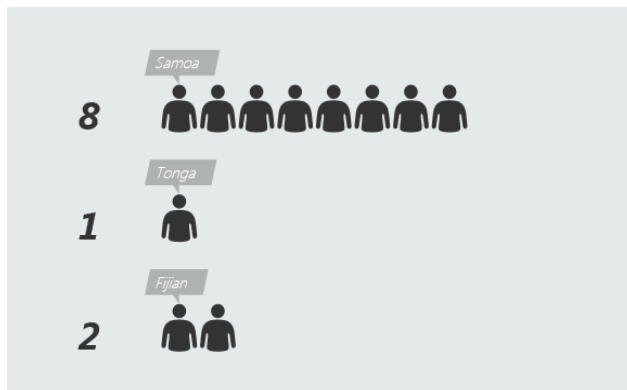


Figure 3a. Participants Ethnicity.

GENERATION STATUS

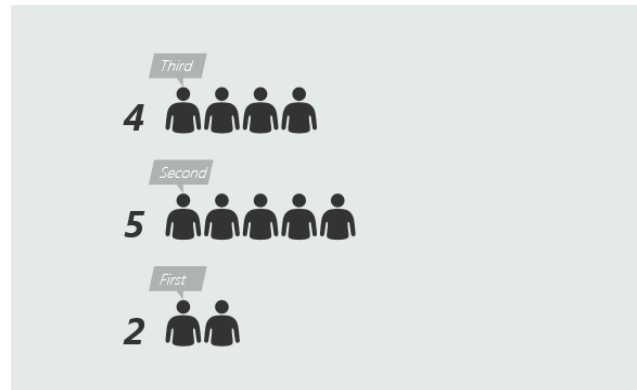


Figure 3b. Participants Self-identify Their Migrant Generation Status.

-IN-FAMILY TO ATTEND UNIVERSITY

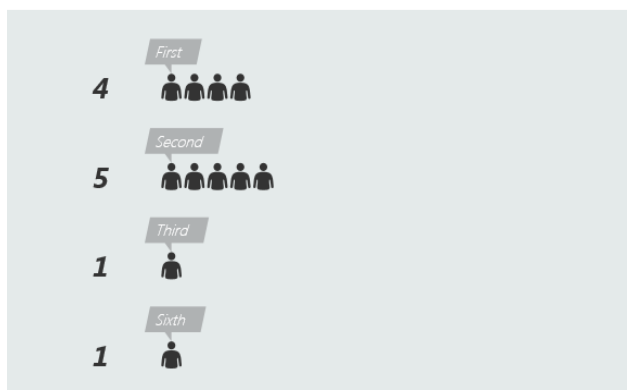


Figure 3c. Participants Status in Family to Attend a University.

HEALTH QUALIFICATION

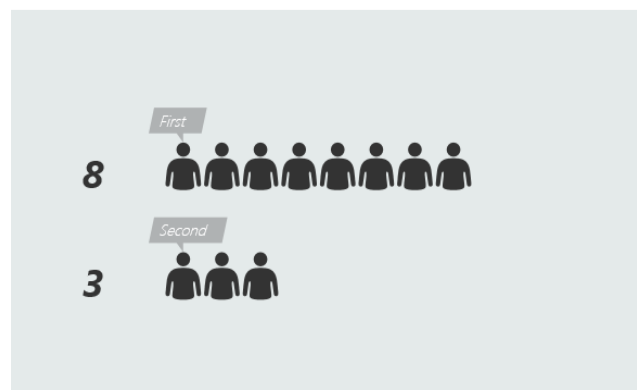


Figure 3d. Participants Status in Family to Obtain a Health Qualification.

generation of NZ born migrants. There was an interesting finding of those who had first attended a university (see Figure 3c). While the majority were first and second generation participants who had attended a university, there was one who noted that he was the sixth to attend university. One stated he was the third generation. In Figure 3d, only three were second generation participants who enrolled in a health programme, while the rest were first-in-family to do so. These findings suggest that the demographic trend is changing for those participating in NZ universities. Of the 11 participants, only one participant, a first-in-family to attend university and enrol in a health degree, did not complete his degree.

FINDINGS & ANALYSIS

Being a Pasifika in NZ

Fairbairn-Dunlop (2014: 874) claimed that “identity (language and culture) are central to Pacific knowledge and knowledge construction process”. Only when we view *Pasifika* students through the cultural lens, can their identity and ways of knowing become both valued and validated. When participants were asked to describe what they feel in regard to being a *Pasifika* in NZ, there were mixed responses. Fairbairn-Dunlop (2014) further noted that for *Pasifika*, there are obligations and values associated with reciprocity for family and for community. This reflects the holistic

view expressed by these participants:

It means that my identity is not only nationality and being born in NZ, it means that I have rich Pacific and Samoan heritage and culture that I carry in all aspects of life and I am committed to honouring that by being the best version of myself that I can be. (P3)

Having strong connections to your family and community. Being able to give back to the community and become a role model for future generations to follow. Being *Pasifika* in NZ also means that you do not have to go through hard times or experience alone as your family and community will always be with you. Finally being *Pasifika* means giving 100% to things that you are passionate about and becoming a leader and inspiration to others. (P6)

Significantly important to the Pacific worldview are the spiritual and cultural elements. This particular student acknowledged that:

To me, it means to have the cultural and spiritual beliefs that are related to my *Pasifika* culture in combination with my groundings in a NZ European environment. (P11)

Anae (2010) summarized these connections to the family as a means of *teu-le-vā* relationships. The sense of obligation, to be a servant leader, to be a role model for future generations are all meaningful descriptions of the reciprocal process to cherish, nurture the *vā*. Whether it is between the spiritual, cultural, family, community, or future generations, the responses here endorse this ontological position of *Pasifika* students' view of themselves being a *Pasifika* in NZ. When asked to explain what success is, one participant noted that:

Being successful is going beyond what my parents did when they arrived here in NZ, that's why I am continuing to do postgraduate. I take their legacy with me and at the same time I try to fulfill their legacy, they made me matai, I still serve my youth community church groups, I serve my family because I take them to their dialysis, I take them to *faalavelave* (obligation), and I study. (P2 *Talanoa*)

Many *Pasifika* students currently studying at universities in Aotearoa/NZ are second and third

generation NZ-born (Statistics New Zealand 2014). While many Pacific people advocate for formal qualifications, the motivation is to benefit the "collective, the extended family, or aiga, rather than the self" (Samu 2010: 5). Consciously or otherwise, many *Pasifika* learners come instilled with their parents' cultural values, knowledge and practices, and ways of learning, yet often times this conflicts with Eurocentric/Western notions of "best" learning. Enabling voice, and providing an avenue for where such voice might be heard and acted upon, is therefore a critical area of study.

Other respondents still distinguish the negative experiences, even as a third migrant generation:

Sometimes it's not positive, when it comes to health I often feel like practitioners think the worst because of my identity and the statistics don't necessarily help, but for me, it's hugely important I embraced my identity and pass on that strong independence in my daughter. (P9)

This finding is of particular interest as third generation migrants, born in NZ, were first-in-family to attend university. It is important to note here that such views are also reinforced by the content of the curriculum taught within the institutions. In the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1996) noted that certain institutions, including educational ones, contribute to the dehumanization of minority groups through curriculum content so they may "soften" the power of the oppressors whilst perpetuating injustice (Freire 1996). In Macedo's (2005) recollection of Freire's class analysis, such a process is a form of racism; a "logic of domination" (Macedo 2005: 13). This being due to the epistemological relationship of the dialogue where the dialogue presents itself to as an indispensable component of the process of both learning and knowing (Macedo 2005: 17). It did not matter if these students were first, second, or third migrants, or even as second or third in family to obtain a qualification or to study health, stigma relating to how others held a view of them was

prominent. It was surprising and noteworthy to be treated otherwise. For example, one noted positively that being *Pasifika* in NZ “makes me feel ‘heard’ and ‘acknowledged’ in the academic world that has been built by the *palagi*/mainstream” (P10).

In the following example, this participant noted that being part of two worlds is pronounced:

Can be challenging and rewarding. I feel as a NZ born there have been times I have often felt out of place within *Pakeha* (Māori word for European) society—feeling of being Pacific and stereotyped even though I am a kiwi born and raised in NZ. On the other hand, can also feel stereotyped by my Pacific peers/family for being too *Palagi* (Samoan word for European people) as I don’t speak Samoan. Just because I don’t speak my language does not necessarily mean I do not understand my culture. I feel rewarded by the fact that I have the privilege of being accustomed to both worlds and have a strong sense of aiga, unity, cultural awareness and understanding because of my family background and upbringing. My parents have always instilled great values and ensured we as children understand our roots, family and where we come from. This is what I am truly thankful for! (P10)

My identity as a person. An ethnic group that is over represented in poor health outcome. Always an underdog and always trying to prove that we are people that can change. (P7)

Being *Pasifika* in NZ was perceived positively as an opportunity and motivating factor to do well.

To be a *Pasifika* in NZ is very unique and for me it motivates me to do better in every, and any situation. For me it also means that we may have to work a little harder than others but that has never been a barrier in the past for me. (P5)

As these statements portray, *Pasifika* people value education. This motivating factor is not new in the research (see for example Fairbairn-Dunlop and Makisi 2003; Samu 2010) but is worth restating given the experiences recounted of not being valued positively or of feeling heard. On the other hand, when reflecting upon Bourdieu’s notion of cultural capital and the connection to habitus, it is quite

evident from the students’ experiences here that there is a mixed social reproduction of inequity (Edgerton and Roberts 2014). This is evident not only in how the values are perceived regarding how they identify themselves within NZ as habitat and what it means for them to make a place—the cultural capital they need to acquire in order to do better as a *Pasifika* migrant. This is noted in their experiences of being a *Pasifika* student/learner at this university.

Being a Pasifika at AUT

Similar themes emerged from the experiences of being *Pasifika* in this tertiary environment. Scholars have appealed that participants “bring their own beliefs and understandings to the research process” (Fairbairn-Dunlop et al. 2014: 80). Being *Pasifika* at this university means to lead and set the scene for family—as a role model where you represent and identify yourself not as an individual but as part of your community, family, and the collective. For example,

To me it meant taking the road less travelled, and paving the pathway for my younger family members to reach for the stars. (P7)

Also, one of the first generation migrants articulated that being a student at this university, you are:

A minority ethnic group trying to better their people. Being *Pasifika* is about trying to stick together and get through the tertiary process. (P9)

Another noted that, this university provides a sense of identity, unity within a diverse culture:

(I) feel “valued” that I am representing my family, Samoan community in NZ and my home country (including my villages, churches in Samoa) in this multicultural NZ “world”. (P10)

This merged with the sense of reciprocity; the value of “serving” and giving back to the community,

for example, by:

Being successful academically so that you can ultimately progress into your area of work and also have the knowledge to help those that may be struggling behind you. (P6)

Aligning with this response, another participant noted that being successful in gaining a qualification means that:

It is my turn now to take care of my parents (nurturing the *vā*) because they took care of me and supported me in my education. I can be paid and be independent financially and be able to help them with family obligations. (P5 *Talanoa*)

A sense of obligation—to help other students reach their goals:

Means everything from being successful to being blessed, so I can help other *Pasifika* students to reach their goals and dreams as well as increasing the numbers of *Pasifika* health professionals in NZ to enable easier access especially for our *Pasifika* communities here in NZ. (P11)

Other participants felt that in the first instance, there was some sense of being inferior.

Initially it was not good, I felt they already had me in a controlled box and I had to prove otherwise. It took me a long time to realize I should not be embarrassed but embrace who I am and the culture I am a part of. (P9)

Tinto (1993) pointed out that where students do not have a good experience in education, they fail. Engaging in *talanoa* with the participants, there were certain values of responsibilities they felt they had to uphold by being a *Pasifika* student in health at this university. One respondent expressed dissatisfaction in his experience being *Pasifika* at this university, even as a third generation migrant and being first-in-family not only to attend a tertiary institution and enrol in a health degree programme. He stated there were:

Lies, deception ... come and complete a degree in sport and recreation... but with no hope of jobs. Nothing but fake agendas. (P4)

Noteworthy was female participants' acknowledgement of the challenge involved in establishing academic skills while also maintaining the *vā* relationships and not to lose their values in the process.

It means that I need to work just as hard and at times more to articulate, process and have my cultural values and world view heard, seen, understood, accepted and held with the same respect as others. (P2)

The term *vā* offers an approach to perceiving relationships between people within a socio-spatial perspective. It is “not the space that separates but one that relates” (Albert Wendt as cited in Mila-Schaaf 2006: 10). Furthermore, she writes, the *vā* governs the relationship of kinship, village networks, community alliances and is associated of balancing the social order. In the context of the *Pasifika* students, it is the relationship among the lecturer, the institution, and other stakeholders.

Education is more than just studying. For these *Pasifika* students studying at this university, “maintaining the family is paramount” (Fairbairn-Dunlop et al. 2014: 83). Being successful means having the ability to perform acts of serving, sharing knowledge through helping others, sense of reciprocity, and obligation of giving back are all examples of nurturing this *vā* relationship of respect.

Experiences Within the University Learning Environment

All the participants took core and shared papers, for example, Human Anatomy and Physiology (HAP), Knowledge, Enquiry and Communication (KEC), Health and the Environment, Lifespan Development, and Methods of Research and Enquiry. When the participants were asked if they found the

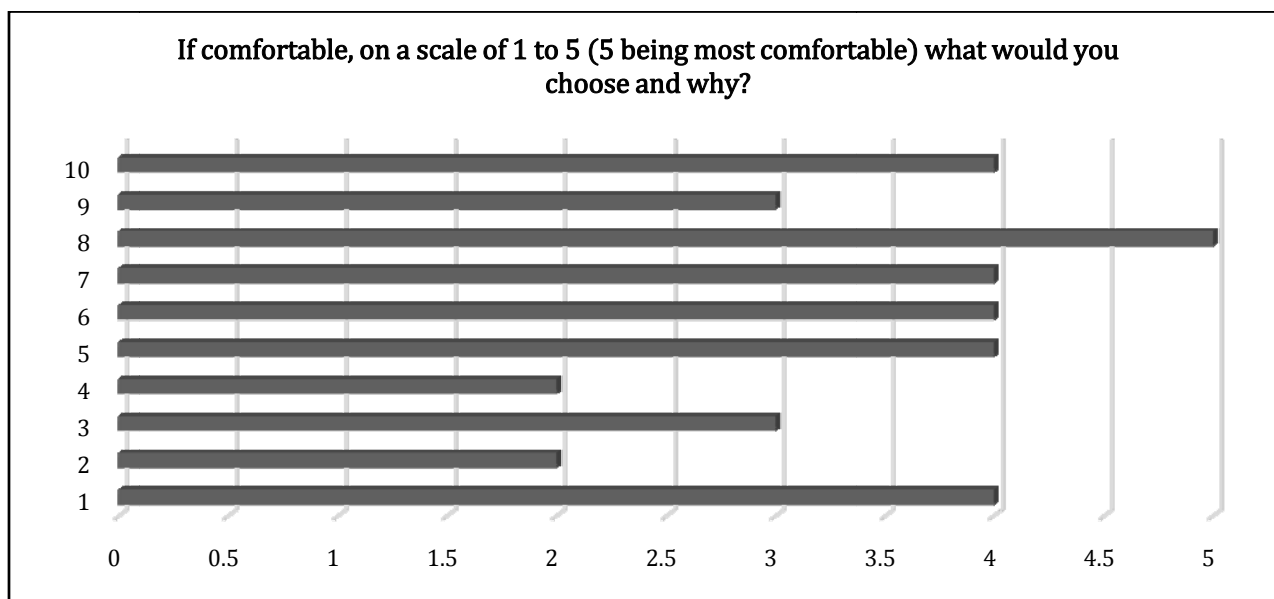


Figure 4. Being Comfortable in a Learning Environment.

learning environment at this university “comfortable”, their responses ranged from “somewhat comfortable” to “comfortable” (scale of 4) (see Figure 4).

As a first migrant and first-in-family to obtain a health degree and attend university, one participant notably provided a very comprehensive account of her initial academic journey to where she is now.

For myself, when I first started at AUT, I did not feel confident seeking help from lecturers unless they were from a *Pasifika* descent. This was not because of nepotism but I felt confident seeking help from *Pasifika* tutors and *Pasifika* student leaders as they could understand and had the answers to the most questions I had from a *Pasifika* point of view. During these tutorials in the *fono* room, it was easier for myself to build rapport with the *Pasifika* student leaders and helped me with building confidence to seek more help and ask questions. From these tutorials, I was then able and confident to ask our non-*Pasifika* lecturers and tutors questions and arranged time with them to help me understand more of what’s needed to be done in assignments and projects. (P11 *Talanoa*)

There are many factors highlighted here by this first generation and first-in-family participant. For

example, accessing *Pasifika* staff as a resource person, one who has knowledge of *Pasifika* viewpoint, accessing cultural spaces—the *fono* room, building rapport with peers (*Pasifika* student leaders), making a voice to ask questions, all proved to be challenging. Chu et al. (2013) with their study with other NZ tertiary institutions found that well planned structured learning communities enhance *Pasifika* learners’ achievement. Many learning communities with a “village” setting provided informal learning inside of a culturally specific lens. Highly valued were *Pasifika* peer groups (Nanai et al. 2013). This student highlighted cultural spaces—the *fono* room where the *Pasifika* Learning Villages are located as a space to collaborate because she feels a sense of belonging, she feels safe to study with others inside of a familiar setting, and she is safe because the space is culturally appropriate. Airini et al. (2010) highlighted that these community based learning spaces are built on cultural elements that provide a comfortable learning environment. These culturally welcoming spaces were not without contention:

AUT is welcoming on the north shore campus to *Pasifika* students. (P8)

At the time I was a part of the *Pasifika* Learning Village which built a more culturally appropriate setting to learn, however with the drive for equity often there were opinions of those receiving mainstream academic support questioning the fairness of having a programme that was targeted to those often of lower academic achievements who were often of *Pasifika* or Māori decent. (P7)

This participant (P9) felt overwhelmed at times with the content rich material they needed to learn. However, having a support person (staff from *Pasifika* Learning Village) to assist or to be in regular contact with, helped encourage resilience and perseverance in their educational journey. For example:

Sometimes I felt they skimmed over a lot of important tough topics that from history with other classes had high failure rates and needed to be broken down further and made sure students really understood the material ... sometimes it could really feel like you were drowning in the content and it's best to give up ... you were lucky if you had a heartfelt tutor or someone who knew and had the patience to help you. (P9)

A recent headline in *The Guardian* voiced similar experiences with Cambridge University of not being able to access relevant material and raised the need to “decolonize” the English syllabuses (Kennedy 2017). The article highlighted that if more integration of other English topics is provided, perhaps there would be a wider participation encompassing diverse students.

Overall experiences noted staff/lecturers and some teaching methods were engaging:

Lecturers showed equality and helped everyone and anyone who needed support. (P1)

Some good practical and theory sessions, but mostly stand and deliver teaching strategies. (P8)

In a recent study from the University of Otago, Sopoaga et al. (2017) evaluated the effectiveness of a programme introduced to improve participation of

Pasifika students and their academic success. In their study, they highlighted that students felt comfortable in this initiative because it was like a “village” setting. A Pacific Island village has many buildings (for example, *fāle*—Samoa; *whāre*—Māori; *vale/bure*—Fijian; *hale*—Hawaii). Noteworthy is the concept of such spaces providing shade and protection. These buildings are spaces that are sometimes a meeting place, a *fono* or *hui*, where different groups meet to serve different functions. Engels-Schwarzpaul, Refiti, and Tuagalu (2017) further explained that these buildings are an apparatus which corral, bind, and hold communities and rituals together reflecting Pacific values, attitudes, beliefs, and practices. It is a place for knowledge construction, for example, to discuss politics; that is, make decisions, or to socialize; to plan events, to deliberate on issues of children, family, village, or church projects for the betterment of the village and their communities. It is a place where people unite, “co-mingle of persons, objects, bound by exchanges of prestige values and genealogies” (Pacific Scholars 2013). In a village setting, the *vā* lines intersect to build relationships. The findings presented here show how *Pasifika* students have familiarity with these cultural spaces as a means of building trust relations, where the *vā* relationships are enforced. More of these spaces are encouraged if institutions are to meet strategic goals to enhance *Pasifika* success.

Institutional factors such as being the only brown face on campus question their sense of belonging:

The staff were welcoming, but the environment was not very inviting. (P3)

...restrictions with student learning centre, Manukau campus was always short of books or regulation. (P4)

A lot of support programmes for *Pasifika* students. (P1)

There were a lot of *Pasifika* centred activities and academic focused groups that were available for me at all stages of my studies. (P5)

It is somewhat comfortable. I choose 2 because it's semicomfortable now that I'm accustomed to the Akoranga North Shore campus, however, there are very few others like me e.g. *Pasifika* on this campus. I am reminded on a daily

basis that I am different and that I am of a minority culture. (P2)

There were times I didn't see the relevance (learning support staff) but I appreciated the effort. (P5)

Pasifika postgraduate participants also expressed their views.

Despite the amazing help from student learning centre that Dr X... and Dr X... provided, it would have been great to have a *Pasifika* staff who would look after the postgraduate *Pasifika* students (especially students doing dissertation and thesis writing) available always. (P10)

Challenges Encountered

Challenges were noted in two contexts: the perceived learning problems the participants encountered when studying the core and shared papers as well as the overall experience in their academic journey as a student. In general, it could be noted that the challenges were multi-level from an institutional stance, to the curriculum content of courses and papers.

Learning Experiences in Core and Shared Health Papers

Participants were asked to identify the papers they found challenging. Except for one participant who explained that "I wasn't at AUT long enough to make a fair judgement", the identified papers were mainly the core and shared ones, such as: Human Anatomy and Physiology (HAP); Human Movement Advanced; Epidemiology; Knowledge, Enquiry and Communication (KEC); Methods of Research and Enquiry; Health and Law Policy; Pharmacology; Mental Health; Qualitative Research Methods; Evidence Based Practice; Promoting Occupational Justice and Participation; and Enabling Physical Performance for Occupation. HAP was perceived as being a highly problematic paper, and historically, this has been so for many *Pasifika* students. The paper has a completion rate below 60% for over a decade. The

reasons were provided through the qualitative responses. For example, this paper portrayed abstract concepts:

It was difficult for my mind to comprehend a lot of information in a short space of time. I was also finding it difficult to make sense of concepts and things that I couldn't see. (P2)

Furthermore, it included unfamiliar/new terminologies:

A lot of new terminologies and systems that were compulsory to learn in a very short time. (P5)

With KEC, the reasons suggested for this paper being difficult include insufficient experience to research skills from previous institutions:

Because I felt that high school did not prepare me for it. Referencing and finding journals were the most difficult as I did not have previous exposure to this. (P6)

Also:

KEC was difficult for writing ... this was not a strong suit of mine. (P7)

Another response highlighted pedagogies that have almost been part of a tertiary environment. For example:

All 3 (core) papers in general were quite broad and utilized the traditional style of teaching (stand in front and deliver content). This made it difficult for me to engage in the papers.

One participant felt the mental health paper particularly challenged her worldview values and beliefs:

Mental Health was difficult, for it was a concept that was foreign as the concept of it being an illness was at first hard to comprehend for I was from a culture that strongly believe in the supernatural and spirituality. (P7)

All the other papers were content-specific with regard to the participant's particular pathways. Some general comments included the learning time and extent of content of the papers:

...content heavy and so little time to take on board info. (P8)

...huge jump from level 1 and so much content that I feel it should have been spread out over 3 papers and not 2. (P9)

Three participants were those who have completed undergraduate studies but were still enrolled with AUT as postgraduates. Challenges that were noted from the participant's overall experiences included a myriad of factors. They identified that a lonely, minority culture is reinforced. For example:

In the core papers, there were very few *Pasifika* in my course. This was a massive challenge. This year I am the only *Pasifika* postgrad person in my masters. It is a lonely pathway and this makes it challenging. (P2)

...there are very few others like me e.g. *Pasifika* on this campus. I am reminded daily that I am different ... that I am of a minority culture. (P2)

Another felt odd:

The environment was mostly welcoming and comfortable. However, there was the odd situation where I would feel confronted because I would be the only brown face in the class!! (P4)

One highlighted the nature of certain papers being Eurocentric designed, for example:

Qualitative Research Methods was too "*palagi*" (European) with how it was delivered. Classes were on the weekends which were affecting family responsibilities. (P10)

One experienced culture shock as a first timer in a tertiary setting:

Social challenges, the normality of the drinking culture, first week being a beer fest, materialistic notions and

ambitions, individual competition for academic excellence. (P3)

Challenges? when I did the research papers and I could not even talk about the *Talanoa* methodology but just mainstream paradigms. I could only write about the *Pasifika* design in my thesis. (P10)

An interesting participant felt overwhelmed with the access to resources:

...towards the end of the degree, all this high-performance equipment was only shown during the end of the degree? Regardless of cost of the item, this is important to be exposed in using timing lights, force plates, also I found it hard to relate at Millennium (campus) with lecturers being American, European, and no Pacific lecturers. (P4)

Balancing work as a *Pasifika* student leader (PSL) and her own studies:

The balance of being a PSL and managing my own studies. I kind of put the needs of our first years before my own which did influence my studies. (P5)

Academic skills related challenges:

Most challenges were in the form of regular academic challenges which were to be expected at university level. However, the biggest challenge by far would have had to be the trying to integrate myself into papers that focused heavily on group work but were confronting in the same way as described in the previous question. (P6)

Financial pressures, religious and family commitments:

Absolutely. Like many other tertiary students' financial pressures: travelling or living costs often took a great toll, especially those of us who had added family and religious commitments. (P7)

To support these challenges, the participants were also asked if any had overdue assignments. All 11 participants stated "yes". When they were asked to clarify how they budget their student time, Figure 5

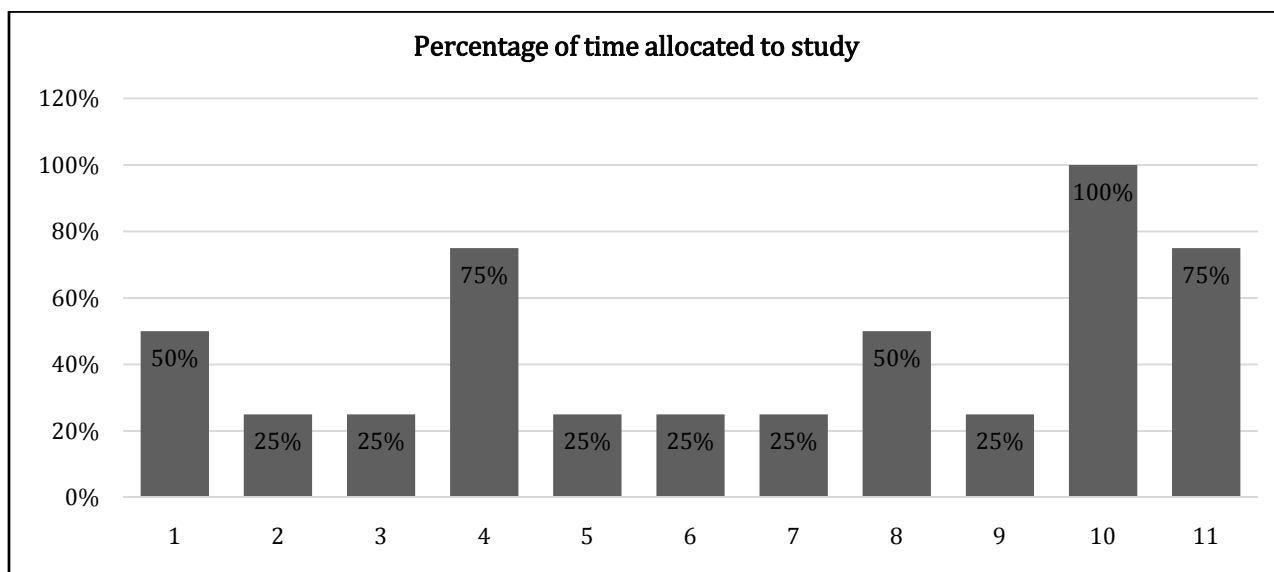


Figure 5. Participants' Perceived Percentage of Time Spent on Study.

portrays that most spend only 25% of their daily/weekly schedule on study. When they were asked to identify the reasons to explain these time allocations, the participants noted that it is because they have to juggle studies with family, church, and youth activities. In fact, the majority noted that 50% of their time is spent on family related commitments (see Figure 6). *Pasifika* notion of time is allocated according to what the *Pasifika* participants valued, for instance, family, for example, caring/looking after grandmothers, little brothers, baby sitting, taking grandmothers to medical appointments, parents to dialysis, family meetings, and vacations as well as weddings, funerals, and family celebrations for priesthood/ordained priests. Church and youth commitments were also acknowledged as itemized in Figure 6.

The notion of *Pasifika* time must be understood from the participants' worldview. Many are transferred obligations. It is important from an institutional level to integrate into "extenuating circumstances" of extension processes these aspects. They are equally important and these are things that

affect why some of our students spent a longer time to graduate.

Amidst the complexity of the papers (content, language, deadlines), personal, family commitments, this participant found a way to overcome her challenges by seeking support from *Pasifika* staff...

There were a lot of challenges I faced during my studies at AUT from trying to be a perfectionist with essay writings and report writings and trying to meet the academic criteria required weren't easy for myself especially with English as a second language. I have also struggled with funding textbooks and resources needed for my course as well as the travelling from West Auckland to Auckland City to North Shore for my lectures and tutorials and back home. There were also major concerns from family breakdown we had which left me with a lot of responsibilities while studying. I have tried to overcome all the challenges during my studies and I am forever grateful for the intense help and support provided by Dr ...xxx... and ...xxx... all the *Pasifika* professional at AUT as well as the PLV who have helped me during my journey academically, mentally and financially. (P11)

With all the challenges voiced, the participants were then specifically asked to express their

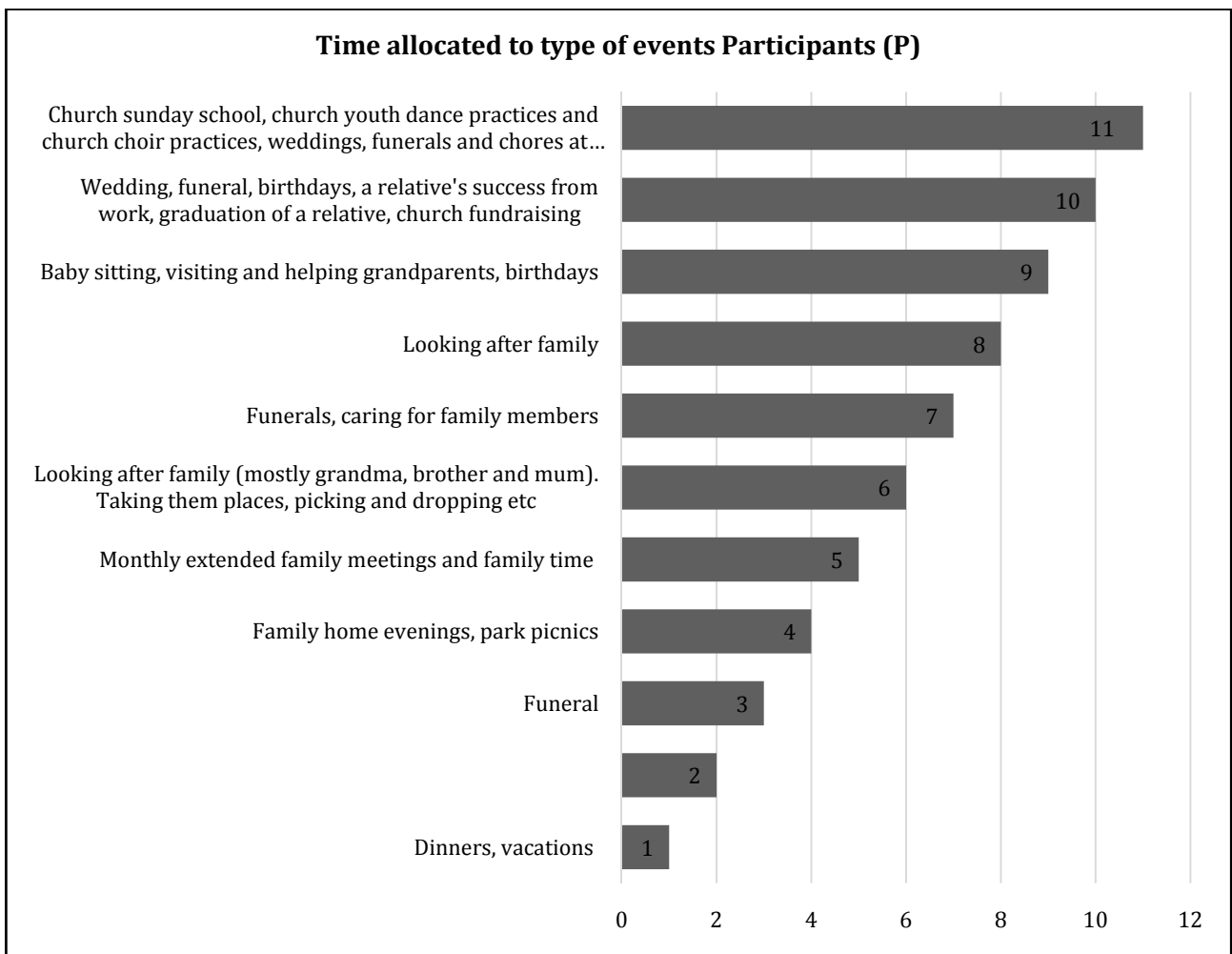


Figure 6. Participants' Reasons for Time Spent on "Other" Matters.

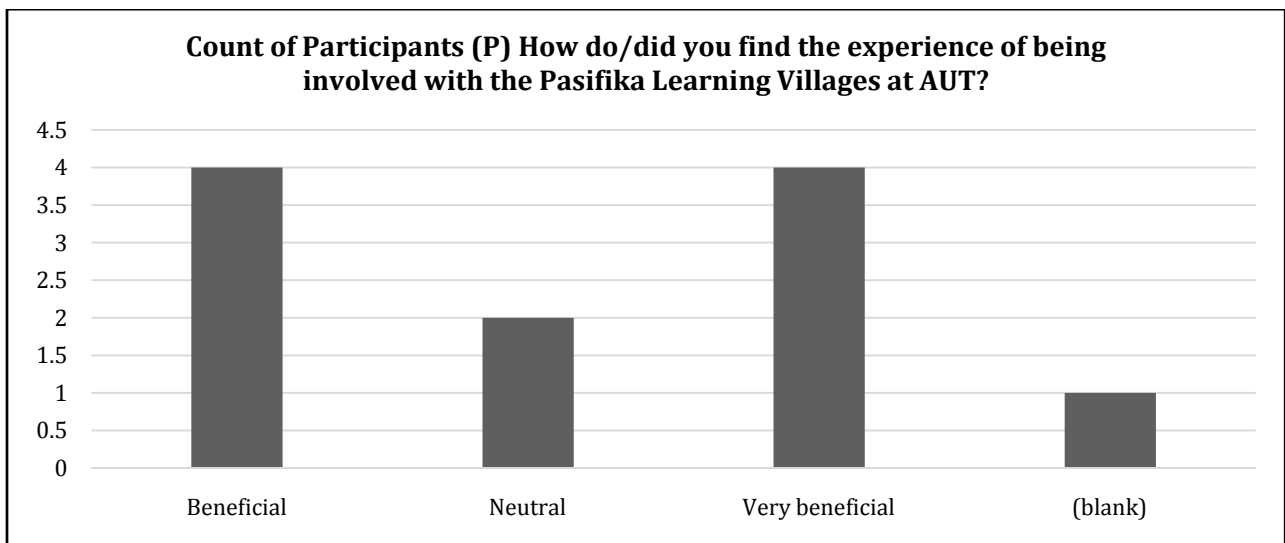


Figure 7. Participants' Experience of the PLV Within the Faculty at AUT.

experiences when they had engaged with the PLV to find out if such an initiative was beneficial or not. Figure 7 demonstrates that the majority found the PLV “beneficial” and “very beneficial”.

Benseman et al. (2006) highlighted in their study family and financial pressures/demands as hindering factors to non-traditional students’ performances. It also outlined the lack of support services and the need to integrate other pedagogical tools to teaching and learning of *Pasifika* students. Role modelling work as well as having a *Pasifika* staff presence was equally an important factor in the institution. This study has elicited a multi-level analysis of factors. It adds value to the literature in that, students are becoming more aware of their *Pasifikaness* and uniqueness to the learning environment within a tertiary institution. By being a *Pasifika* at this university, “you do not need to lose your identity” as P10 (Participant 10) noted, understanding that these baggages and cultural nuances are part and partial of accepting them as unique students to the learning environment at this university. Family are the external motivation for success. Bourdieu’s view on cultural capital is that the function of education is to embed cultural and social reproduction of one’s values. The university’s key strategic objective number ten (KSO 10) is to develop culturally appropriate learning environments to promote *Pasifika* success. Rather than paying lip service to KSO 10, these cultural capital and values should be encouraged to nurture, cherish, and beautify the social relationships of the *Pasifika* students, so their values and beliefs represented by their worldview are reinforced and socially reproduced to promote access and widen participation in tertiary environments not only in Aotearoa/NZ but elsewhere where *Pasifika* people are concerned.

CONCLUSIONS

Pasifika students’ experiences and challenges are

multi-layered. This study has explored the *Pasifika* students’ worldview to understand three things. First, that success for them is maintaining and nurturing their relationships with the families, community and upholding the values of their heritages. With a *Pasifika* lens, the collective of family and spiritual values are prominent. Second, successful experiences of the students studying health are viewed from the institutional contribution, with respect to the accessibility of learning communities and *Pasifika* support staff both at the academic and pastoral level. Third, the challenges experienced while studying health related courses in a tertiary institution such as AUT, can be resolved. The findings have demonstrated that the *Pasifika* students’ voices and stories highlighted that through participating in cultural spaces and accessing role models, their success were enhanced. One only needs to apply a cultural lens to understand the holistic Pacific worldview to enable learning opportunities for these students to realize their potential and acknowledge their uniqueness.

The PLV has provided a platform to fulfil AUT’s key objective to create learning environments that promote *Pasifika* success and contribution to the communities. With such policies in place, it is important that institutions such as AUT take action to promote *Pasifika* success as “business as usual” practices. In order for this to occur, there remains a need to integrate more *Pasifika* flavour into its curriculum content, to continue with communities of best practices as evidenced here the creation of the PLV initiative, to increase *Pasifika* presence as role models, academic lecturers, and to integrate under the “extenuating circumstances” family matters in extension processes which are only limited to funerals. The spiritual, social-cultural aspects also need to be included. Only then will participation be improved.

This research adds value to the co-construction of methodological framework where the mixed method

approach has integrated *Pasifika* paradigms. The *talanoa* approach allowed for students' voices to be heard and valued. While a *talanoa* approach was expanded upon, of more value is knowledge of strategies students perceive to be effective and which might therefore be deliberately enhanced to foster *Pasifika* student success moving forward.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge their anonymous self-identified *Pasifika* participants whose responses are represented in this research. This is your voice. Thank you for the narratives to reclaim, revive, revalue, and embrace our knowledge/heritages to promote culturally appropriate models that value our worldview whilst making a place within our tertiary environments to promote *Pasifika* success.

Notes

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