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Retaining non-traditional students: lessons learnt from Pasifika students in New Zealand

John Benseman [a]*, Eve Coxon [a], Helen Anderson [b] and Melani Anae [a]

[a]*University of Auckland, New Zealand;* [b]*Manukau Institute of Technology, New Zealand*

As New Zealand tertiary education has undergone extensive review processes, debate has centred not only on the need to extend the participation rates of groups previously under-represented, but also how to retain these under-represented groups once they are recruited into tertiary programmes. This paper draws on a large-scale study of the factors that influence successful completion of tertiary qualifications for Pasifika students. Using a diverse range of data sources throughout New Zealand, the study identified a range of factors that impede retention, as well as positive factors that help increase retention. Its findings support the contention that the capacity of educational facilities to retain students is a function of the interface between student and institution, and the institution and the community.

Introduction

Traditionally, the debate about participation of under-represented social groups in tertiary education has focused primarily on recruitment—at least getting 'non-traditional' students into educational institutions and on to the enrolment forms. Increasingly however, the debate in many countries, including New Zealand, has turned more to the issue of retention. Getting under-represented groups enrolled may constitute success in one respect, but it is only a first step. Retention of students is the second, and equally vital, step in enabling education to achieve the impact that is behind the rationale for education as a key component of a society's social policy.

Since 2001, New Zealand tertiary education has undergone extensive review. The Tertiary Education Advisory Commission's (TEAC, 2000, 2001a, 2001b, 2001c) on

*Corresponding author. School of Education, The University of Auckland PB 92019, Auckland, New Zealand. Email: j.benseman@Auckland.ac.nz

the proposed structural changes has specified a concern for successful Pasifika participation as central to what a revitalized tertiary education system will need to achieve. In 2003, a report by the Ministry of Education (2003) on its operational strategy for tertiary education included specific objectives relating to Pacific people and a further report, *Pasifika education plan* (Ministry of Education, 2001b) set the following goals:

- Significantly increasing Pacific students' participation in tertiary education at all levels.
- Significantly improving Pacific students' achievement in tertiary education, and closing the gaps with non-Pacific students completely in 20 years.

In light of these policy and strategic concerns, this paper explores the case of Pasifika people in the New Zealand education system. It first reviews their current participation patterns and issues of retention. The second part of the paper then reviews selected findings of a study of Pasifika participation in tertiary education (Anae *et al.*, 2002), including their reasons for withdrawal and the strategies that have been successful in increasing retention of these students through to graduation.

Pasifika people in New Zealand education

Pasifika people constitute approximately 6% of the total population of 3.9 million New Zealanders. The great majority live in urban areas, especially in the largest city, Auckland. Like many ethnic minority groups in other countries, Pasifika are disproportionately over-represented among those failed by the schooling system. This pattern of failure can be seen in the level of leaving qualifications for school-leavers below, which shows that fewer than 10% of Pasifika leave school with the conventional qualifications for entry into university (Bursary and Entrance qualifications) and that over one-quarter leave with no qualifications at all (Ministry of Education, 2004).

Given that a large proportion of Pasifika students lack the necessary qualifications to gain automatic entry into tertiary education (especially universities), it is not surprising that they (along with indigenous Maori) have long been under-represented in tertiary education statistics. However, their rates of participation have been improving steadily over the past decade, for example, in 1990, Pasifika students made up only 2.5% of the total number of tertiary students, but by 2000 they had increased to 4.8% of the total. Table 1 below shows that while the total number of tertiary education students has been growing only slowly over recent years, the total numbers for all Pasifika groups have been growing considerably faster than the national average.

This pattern of growth can probably be attributed to a number of factors, including the growth of bridging programmes to recruit non-traditional students (Benseman & Russ, 2001), an open entry policy for anyone over 20 years of age, irrespective of their qualifications, and the growth of enrolments in new forms of tertiary provision, especially Private Training Establishments (PTEs).

Table 1.   Number of students enrolled in formal qualifications at tertiary education providers, 31 July 1997–2001

Ethnicity	Total, 1997	Total, 1998	Total, 1999	Total, 2000	Total, 2001
European	164,066	162,478	161,660	166,028	168,137
Maori	33,616	35,799	37,544	40,161	51,685
Pasifika groups					
Samoan	3,603	5,121	5,311	5,540	6,082
Cook Is.	1,242	1,851	1,933	2,042	2,434
Tongan	970	1,483	1,612	1,791	1,882
Niuean	510	761	813	848	819
Tokelauan	246	326	324	296	375
Fijian	606	860	981	1,065	1,159
Other Pacific	2,651	413	338	377	329
Chinese	10,994	12,884	12,487	12,713	13,027
Indian	3,079	3,572	3,778	4,099	4,311
Other Asian	5,811	4,158	5,039	5,648	5,907
Other	7,609	8,285	8,048	8,988	10,075
International students	7,524	8,430	9,034	11,638	17,658
Not stated	4,075	4,608	4,871	3,119	3,581
Total	246,601	251,029	253,773	264,353	287,461

Source: Ministry of Education: http://minedu.govt.nz/

Open entry

Unlike most Western countries, New Zealand has long had an open entry policy for its tertiary education system, including universities. Although there are still entry requirements for some programmes, such as medicine and law, any New Zealand citizen over 20 years has an automatic right of entry to all forms of tertiary education. This provision has been a significant strategy for increasing the participation of groups with poor school qualifications. For example, within the Arts faculty at one major institution, a third of all students in 1999 were admitted by this form of admission. This group comprised:

- one-third of all women;
- over one-half of all Maori and Pasifika;
- one-quarter of all Asian;
- nearly all mature age students.

Although, on the surface, this provision appears an attractive strategy for equity purposes, later discussion in this paper will show that it also has a downside.

Participation across the tertiary sector

Although considerable progress has been made in increasing overall participation rates for Pasifika (Scott, 2003), closer examination of the data shows that most of the
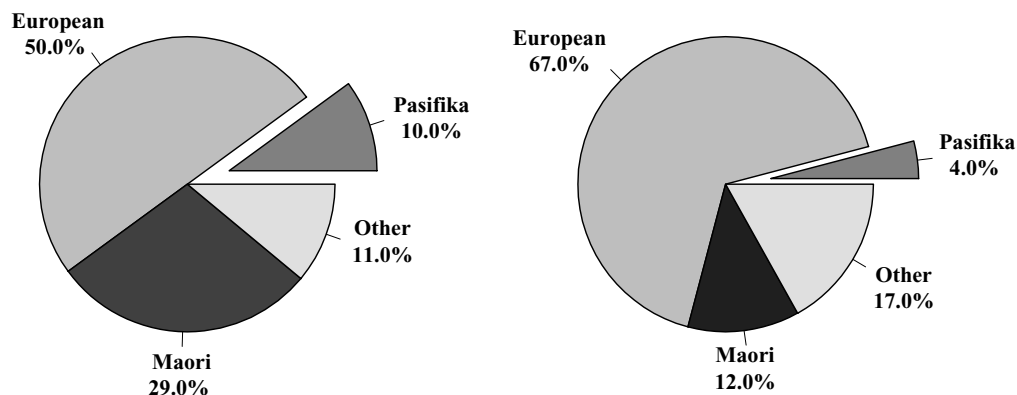
Figure 1.   Distribution of PTE and TEI students, by ethnicity: 1999

increase has occurred in the less prestigious end of the educational spectrum, especially in the PTEs which offer predominantly low-level certificates and diplomas, rather than the higher status degrees offered at tertiary education institutions (TEIs, mainly universities and polytechnics).

In other words, while there have been significant positive developments in the overall rates of Pasifika participation, they still do not match the academic levels of their non-Pasifika counterparts. It is not clear at this point whether this discrepancy will be solved with successive generations gradually matching the academic norms of mainstream New Zealand society, or whether it is essentially a type of 'educational inflation' where the gap between Pasifika and non-Pasifika (especially Europeans and Asians) stays constant, and Pasifika are merely running faster in terms of educational qualifications to stay where they are at present. In the interim, however, there is the more immediate problem of ensuring that participation culminates in successful completion of students' qualifications.

The issue of retention

While retention can be interpreted in a number of ways (such as students withdrawing from a programme once they have learnt what they aimed to learn, but before the formal end of the course), it is usually interpreted as the successful completion of a programme's formal assessment requirements.

The seminal work of Vincent Tinto (see e.g. Tinto *et al.*, 1994) focused on attrition by asking the question: 'Why do students leave?' His more recent work (e.g. Tinto, 2002) has shifted focus to why students stay (persistence). Explicit in this work is the expectation that institutions will take responsibility for the quality of the learning environment they offer. Tinto's early work identified lack of academic and social engagement as central to attrition. Gee (1998) interpreted institutions' failure to provide an 'engaging' environment as covert exclusivity through maintenance of a closed discourse, with limited opportunities for participation beyond the fringes for

groups not traditionally well represented in tertiary study. Although more recently Tierney (1999) has challenged Tinto and others over their lack of attention to reciprocity as a mechanism for creating engagement, institutional responsibility persists as a key element in models of retention (Cabrera *et al.*, 1993).

While the New Zealand literature on retention is small, indicative studies offer findings to be considered. Rolleston (2004), for example, in a small-scale study of Maori and Pasifika students who left one institution before course completion, found that while there were more external (e.g. personal, economic, family) reasons given by respondents for their leaving, internal (institutional) reasons accounted for over 35% of comments. This study included an interesting set of contradictions between reasons indicated for leaving on an itemized choice question and reasons given in open-ended questions. These contradictions are suggestive of ambivalence within respondents about attributing causality, and may reflect some impact from contact with institutional norms that are at variance with community norms around valuing cultural diversity.

The current study identifies a range of recurring themes with regard to retention and offers evidence to support interpretations of the reasons for persistence (or attrition) that are grounded in institutional approaches as well as personal, social and economic matters. The issues of retention are further backgrounded by the quantitative data offered below.

Retention is increasingly a concern with regard to Pasifika students' education. For while increasing numbers are enrolling in tertiary education, they are also disproportionately represented among those students who do not complete their courses. A recent study of retention, completion and progression in New Zealand tertiary education (Scott, 2003) identified retention as an issue in the system as a whole. While Pasifika rates of retention as defined by completion are lower than other groups, especially at degree level and below, Pasifika progression rates are comparable to other groups at degree level and below and lowest at postgraduate level.

Unfortunately, there is a total lack of national data on retention, which makes it difficult to assess the true extent of this issue across the country (Nicholl & Sutton, 2001), but some indications of the extent of the issue can be inferred from data from individual institutions.

Pass rates provide a further numeric view of 'retention'. For example, data from one large tertiary institution shows that there are certainly considerable variations in pass rates across the different ethnic groups, due to students withdrawing from courses or failing assessment requirements (Table 2). The pass rates also vary considerably by the level of study (Table 3).

As can be seen from Tables 2 and 3, the issue has not been improving over time and pass rates are worst among social groups who have the lowest participation rates (albeit, steadily improving) in New Zealand tertiary education. It is clear that lower-level papers are acting as a *de facto* culling mechanism to reduce the numbers of students, and that they cull differently according to ethnicity.

Furthermore, the pass rates are especially poor among students who enter university under the open entry policy, discussed earlier. At the same institution, 43% of

Table 2.   Overall pass rates for one tertiary education institution, 1996–9

Ethnicity	1996 %	1997 %	1998 %	1999 %
Maori	76.8	77.6	78.1	77.2
Pasifika	63.9	63.3	64.4	64.0
Asian	79.3	80.1	90.7	81.0
Other	78.4	81.0	81.2	82.3
European	87.8	89.0	89.0	89.4
Not stated	87.7	90.4	90.6	82.1
All students	83.1	83.6	83.8	83.8

Table 3.   Pass rates for one tertiary education institution by level, 1996–9

Paper level	Maori %	Pasifika %	Asian %	Other %	European %	Not stated %	All students %
1 (low)	69.5	58.3	75.2	71.8	83.9	76.8	77.4
2	75.7	61.9	80.4	84.4	89.3	88.1	83.3
3	82.7	69.3	87.6	88.1	93.5	87.3	89.4
4	93.5	91.8	93.2	90.3	96.5	97.4	95.0
5 (high)	100.0	95.0	91.2	96.8	85.2	90.5	88.4
Total	77.2	64.0	81.0	82.3	89.4	82.1	83.8

Pasifika students enrolling under open-entry provision failed *all* of their papers, versus 29% of Pasifika who entered with conventional qualifications; the equivalents for their non-Pasifika counterparts were 28% (open entry) and 6% (conventional entry). These data show that successful retention is certainly a major issue in the push for achieving a fair and equitable education system and it is one that warrants urgent attention. The second part of this paper therefore draws on the findings of a broader study of Pasifika participation in tertiary education for some insights into this issue (Anae *et al.*, 2002).

Methodology

The four authors of this paper were the principal investigators of a study that used a range of research strategies and methods for data (both quantitative and qualitative) collection including:

- the identification and analysis of previous research and writing on the topic of Pacific students' access to, participation in and experiences of tertiary education.
- national statistical data from the Ministry of Education.
- a survey of tertiary institutions' present policies, programmes and strategies aimed at recruiting and retaining Pacific students.

- interviews with 16 key informants in selected educational institutions, with experience in recruiting, supporting and retaining Pacific students.
- interviews with 15 Pacific students who have participated in tertiary programmes and completed their studies.
- interviews with 15 Pacific students who have participated in tertiary programmes, but did not complete their studies.
- interviews with 56 non-participants (people who would normally have been expected to enrol in tertiary education, but didn't).
- interviews with eight groups of Pacific community members (including families of potential students).

The interviews were located mainly in Auckland, but also included some in Wellington (the other main location of Pacific peoples in New Zealand). All data from individual and group interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed using conventional qualitative data analysis and the NUDIST4 software package. All individuals were given acronyms and full confidentiality was assured, and the study was approved by the University of Auckland Human Subjects Research Committee. The final draft report was circulated for comments to all key persons and individual interviewees and comments noted before the report was finalized. For the purposes of this paper, material pertinent to retention has been extracted from the available data drawn from Pacific student participants and key informants from the institutions involved.

Pacific research protocols

The research team was committed to ensuring that appropriate Pasifika cultural protocols and processes were embedded in the research design, implementation, analysis, report writing and dissemination. Therefore, the researchers sought to:

- uphold Pacific 'ownership' of the objectives and processes of the research.
- seek and utilise Pacific input at all stages of the research and use consultative and participatory processes.
- proceed in a manner appropriate to the cultural contexts concerned and ensure that language was not a barrier to participation.
- ensure that the European members in the research team acknowledged their cultural limitations, and affirmed their commitment to working in culturally safe ways.
- ensure that all aspects of the research were monitored closely for safety and relevance, both by the Pacific senior researchers, and community-based interviewers.
- ensure that senior Pacific researchers managed and had overall responsibility for research interfaces with Pacific participants (Anae, 2002).

Causes of Pasifika withdrawal

Consistent with the international research literature on educational participation and retention (Courtney, 1992), respondents in this study identified a range of barriers

that often led to Pasifika students withdrawing from their studies or performing poorly. This study went a step further than most such studies and gathered information from successful students to identify elements that supported persistence. Furthermore, key informants in institutions provided another layer of data identifying institutional ethos and strategies that supported or failed to support Pasifika success. While some of these factors, such as lack of personal motivation, are common to all student groups, others have a distinctively Pacific aspect about them.

Motivation and attitudes

For example, in common with many students who are new to the culture of tertiary study, the freedom of the relaxed, unregulated nature of the student lifestyle was new to many and they lacked the discipline to keep up with their studies:

> tertiary education? … I just loved the student lifestyle … it's just choice, classes when you want to do them, not having to go to them if you [don't] want to and it was just a really relaxed lifestyle which … I shouldn't have been, but I got into the student lifestyle … sort of,put my studies aside and it was just … all I'd strive for every year was just to pass enough just to get back in next year. I know I could of done better if I applied myself, but I got lazy. (Cook Islands female, age 20–25)

However, because of Pasifika under-representation historically in tertiary education, a much higher proportion of students come from families where very few other family members have tertiary educational experience. This means that there is less 'cultural capital' in these families in terms of accumulated experience and knowledge from which the students can draw to help them build appropriate academic habits and guide them through the inevitable crises that occur during their studies.

Both the key informants (many of whom were Pasifika) and Pasifika students themselves also confirmed the importance of attitudes towards study as central to whether students succeeded or failed in their studies. They reported that many Pacific students do not try their best at tertiary education level because they have a mindset that the system is out to fail them, because it fails to take into account their cultural differences. However, some participants reported that Pacific students' cultural knowledges can be validated once the European system is mastered:

> People say that this system is the problem, but I would have to say that in my experience the system was not the problem, it was me—I had a problem with working in the system … I expected the system to change and suit me, but that's not the point here … it's not to change the system—the point is to transfer different skills from your way of thinking, so I had to take my skill learnt in my Pacific Island heritage and transfer them to this system here which is basically the Palagi [European] system. (Samoan female, age 30–35)

Participants reported that this mindset was one of the major barriers to Pacific students doing well at tertiary level.

It is interesting to note that in the consultation with community groups, many parents expressed concern that going to tertiary directly from school may be too early for them, and thought that maturity would help them focus on their studies. They

also felt that leaving school and getting a job might make them 'realize the value of the dollar', and thus the decision to pursue an education at a tertiary institution became a more mature decision because of a change of attitude and also the realization of the value of education. Many parents expressed that this had been their experience and that sometimes one must 'learn the hard way'.

Family pressure and demands

Other aspects the respondents identified were more clearly related to Pasifika cultural life. The collective nature of Pacific cultures and the importance of family, for example, often clashed with the demands of academic life. Although families were usually supportive of their involvement in education and expected academic success, this was not always the case:

> Okay, expectation, my father and mother didn't expect much of me … I remember when I was young, my dad and mum would always say … just do my best in school and no pressure … they didn't ask a lot from school. (Cook Islands female, age 25–30)

For others, this did not always mean that they were expected to ultimately succeed (i.e. maintain attendance and pass exams)—enrolment was seen as an achievement in itself, and one that did not necessarily lead to successful completion of a programme. Many participants expressed that while there was an expectation to go into tertiary education, there was no real support or encouragement from parents in their studies:

> They just wanted me to do well in school—they wanted me to go to university status and I reached that and after a while they wanted me to quit school and get a job. (Samoan female, age 20–25)

Outside academic life, many participants reported that there were considerable expectations placed on them by their parents to attend church and family activities as well as study. For the most part, they would be worn out from trying to fulfil all their obligations and, as a result, their studies would suffer:

> I've been lazy with homework mainly and being all worn out by church stuff and family things, so it was all like, um … tied with having a lot of activities I was involved in as well as having to go to school and holding a part-time job as well there in the end. (Samoan female, age 20–25).

A few participants reported that another barrier they faced was looking after sick family members and because this was time-consuming, they would often find it difficult to juggle both the task of looking after them and studying. Participants reported that their obligation to their family was seen as more important and therefore they would have to abandon their studies. The key informants confirmed these observations; for example, one key informant observed:

> There are also family pressures that build up. I mean a lot of them are … actually it's quite sad because we're actually putting them on a pathway to further training and a lot of them do end up moving on into the tertiary training, but because of the financial hardship … the imperatives for jobs and employment are much stronger, so they'll pull them out of the programme.

Peer-group pressures

Similarly, peer groups can either be both a positive and a negative force in the mix of factors that influence a student to persist or withdraw. Some of the respondents felt that their peers were the greatest influence on their academic participation, both at school and once they entered tertiary education. While they saw the fun activities they engaged in with their peers as an inevitable part of growing up, these activities also unduly took over their lives in some cases, to the point that they seriously hindered academic deadlines and requirements:

> I had a group and they were always looking for fun so I got in trouble sometimes from my mother cause they wanted to go out a lot in the weekend or just hang out in K road after school instead of going home … positive cause they made my life fun … home was not so great at times … my friends were good at making me laugh. (Niuean female, age 25–30)

Financial pressures

The costs of attending tertiary education in New Zealand have increased dramatically over the past 15 years, requiring most students to take on student loans (average \$NZ 14, 000 on graduation in 2002), which were not required previously. Financial considerations have therefore become a major concern for contemporary New Zealand students. Because Pasifika families have much lower household incomes than the average New Zealander, financial issues inevitably loom greater for Pacific students. Many of the participants reported that was their financial situation at home was another major barrier that prevented them from finishing their tertiary education. Most of these participants reported that they had to leave their studies and find at least a part-time job in order to fulfil commitments to provide financially for their family:

> financially I think was the biggest barrier in my schooling … I was working part-time— even when I was at uni, I was working part-time … [my] father decided to go back to uni, and then it just left mum being the only working person in my family … I felt quite obligated that being like how old was I … I was about 25 at that time. I felt like I had to put my career on hold just to help look after my mother, well, my parents and also my son who was going on to, like, primary school … so I had to really think about them. I mean, I was okay because I'm half-way, so yeah … the big thing was financial reasons. (Samoan female, age 25–30)

> I didn't finish my studies, 'cause I had a daughter … I started working part-time, but when I went back I got As and Bs, but I couldn't cope and left 'varsity, 'cause I needed money. So in four years I passed 10–15 papers. Having baby wasn't the barrier, but I needed to be in the right frame of mind and be ready to study, 'cause I'd be wasting my need … when I know I'm not going to piss around. (Cook Islands female, age 20–25)

A few participants reported that the financial situation at home could sometimes be so bad that the only expectation that their parents had of them was to leave school and find a job. Most of the participants reported that they had to work part-time while studying, which they felt impeded their ability to do well in their studies. Missing lectures and tutorials—compounded by often feeling too tired to think, let

alone write essays and swot for tests and exams—led to not completing courses and failing exams. At the same time, many participants were somewhat bitter that they had been forced to take out student loans to get them through, and this feeling was aggravated by the fact that they would still owe money, even if they did not complete their courses.

Lack of support services

Most tertiary education institutions now have various forms of student support services aimed at assisting students who are struggling with the demands of academic life. Some of these services now have a distinctive cultural underpinning, but even so, they still require that students are aware of the services and able to access them— preferably as a positive influence, rather than as an emergency, crisis-driven service 'at the bottom of the cliff'.

Many students in this study reported a lack of knowledge about what support services were available, where they were and how to access them (see Anae & Sua'ali'i-Suani, 1997). They also talked about their absence in their particular departments and their feelings of alienation, and how they really needed support at many levels:

> Students need lots of support … They need role models and be told, encouraged to go to class by someone they can trust. (Key informant)

> PI [Pacific Island] students need a support group to encourage them to continue doing the work … Because I see a lot of them just sitting around playing cards. (Cook Islands male, 30–35)

Language

Language issues are much less an issue for these participants than what earlier research showed and are likely to continue to diminish in the future because of the increasing numbers of Pasifika speaking English from an early age. None the less, confidence in speaking out remains a major barrier for those students born in the Pacific whose English is not so fluent. These students felt that they were at a disadvantage with their English-speaking peers who they thought were able to ask questions and have them answered by the teacher, which then, in turn, advanced their own knowledge of the topic being studied:

> [being] reserved, that didn't help. I didn't realize in the classroom in New Zealand that you need to discuss and speak up when you have problems. (Tongan male, age 30–35)

Increasing retention among Pasifika

The identification of factors that lead to students withdrawing or failing is an essential step prior to tertiary institutions devising strategies to increase retention and pass rates. In some cases (such as the inclusion of Pacific languages, availability of financial help), the strategies are reasonably obvious and straightforward as the 'flip side' of the issues raised in the previous sections. This section of this paper therefore turns to

some of the less obvious ways by which respondents thought Pasifika participation could be made more successful.

Pasifika staff

Most of the key informants commented on the value of Pacific academics as role models, mentors and support for Pacific students, and expressed concern about their low numbers in the academic workforce. The number of Pacific academics continues to be low in most institutions, a fact that is not helped by the high workload for these staff members. Key informants also pointed out, however, that many institutions have reasonable numbers of Pacific non-academic staff and that these people are invaluable in providing a Pacific presence, especially in dealing with administrative issues:

> now we've got a Pacific person on the inquiries desk, [you] can't overestimate how much difference that makes to students coming in here. (key informant)

Allied to the presence of Pasifika staff, was the provision of services and programmes designed specifically to support Pasifika students. Recent supplementary government grants had been used in this area, including mentoring programmes, leadership programmes, targeted tutorials and family-based programmes. Respondents stated that the success of such initiatives depended on how well they have been designed to meet actual need, ongoing financial commitment and the strength of their evaluation processes.

Pacific presence in institutions

There was mixed experience among the respondents of their providers dedicating space to Pacific students as a physical expression of commitment to the cultural identity of Pacific students. Responses varied from no identifiable place through a labelled group of offices, study centres and, in the case of PTEs who saw their role as primarily with Pacific students, classrooms and administrative centres set up with Pacific themes. Some respondents saw the provision of a dedicated space as important, while others suggested that all facilities should be accessible and welcoming to Pacific students.

Respondents reported Pacific events and associations as an effective way to profile the Pacific presence in tertiary institutions and a method of providing a peer group for students who may be feeling isolated. The effectiveness of these activities depended on the leadership skills of individual students and the time commitments of recruitment and liaison staff.

Particularly noteworthy here is the role of PTEs in providing supportive environments for Pasifika students (who are disproportionately over-represented in these recently developed institutions—most of which are relatively small and are often focused on specific social groups or curriculum areas). Some PTEs have been developed with a strong Pacific orientation in their operations, student recruitment and

philosophies. Respondents saw this development as a very positive move whereby the total institution reflected a Pacific orientation, as opposed to making an inevitably small part of large, predominantly European institutions, Pacific-friendly.

Role models

The provision of role models warrants specific mention—particularly, for a group of students where the most frequent life pattern is to leave school early to enter the workforce, and for whom education is largely synonymous with schooling.

Role models influence students long before they arrive to enrol in tertiary education. Many of the participants reported the huge amount of support and mentoring that they received from teachers, whom they thought generally as encouraging their academic efforts at school. For many participants, it was 'a teacher' that was most influential in their decision to pursue tertiary education. Participants recalled the large amount of encouragement that they received from teachers telling them that they could 'achieve in anything they did'. Many reported that this influence fuelled their interest and motivation to pursue tertiary education.

Participants also reported that they were very receptive to the support and information offered by their teachers, as they felt that because they had been successful in 'the system', they would be in the best position to offer advice. A few participants also reported that it was their teachers who helped them realize where their potential lay in terms of their strongest subjects. With the help of their teachers, participants were able to develop their academic skills and succeed in these areas. Most participants also reported that it was their teachers that they went to for tertiary education options and getting the relevant information in career planning, as there was no other service available to them.

The positive influences and experiences that participants spoke of in terms of their secondary school teachers changed dramatically when they reached tertiary institutions. A few participants reported that lecturers did not influence them greatly as they were just a 'number on the board', and that the relationship between student and lecturer was very impersonal.

Many participants also saw their parents or older siblings/cousins as their role models, and talked about how much pride and joy their parents felt when they graduated from their courses. There was a sense that their achievements were not individual accomplishments, but family ones. Others saw mentors or older students as role models:

> talking to older students … about five years ahead of you was good … and talk to them like they're at your level. Pretty much wanting to be where they're at in three years' time. (Samoan female, age 25–30)

Pedagogical components

Respondents identified a wide range of pedagogical components of successful programmes that they felt were integral to their success with Pasifika. While these components are not exclusive to Pasifika, they are nevertheless seen as appropriate for

these students in particular. Common features among these programmes were as follows:

- Teaching that is student centred.
- Teaching that ensures academic and social engagement between learners and lecturers.
- Commitment to high-achievement standards and the expectation that all students can achieve.
- Active willingness to make these standards accessible through academic support processes—e.g. academic tutorials and individual assistance, including goal setting.
- Access to resources—e.g. developing familiarity with libraries, assistance with access to texts, fostering use of computers.
- Accessible pastoral care.
- Functioning within a 'staircasing' environment that provides links from one level of qualification up to the next.

One key informant stated the importance of such pedagogical components:

> if you have a relationship, like you know a learner and a tutor, a relationship that is really good and supported and all that, and there is actually a relationship there, they can really achieve a lot. But if it's not there, they know you don't care, it actually affects their learning first. (Key informant)

Information

Accurate, appropriate and timely information is essential for making good decisions throughout an academic career. Many participants reported that Pacific tertiary students should develop some sort of advisory or information service for secondary school students. Participants emphasized that it is the tertiary students who should facilitate such a service as they could provide it through going into schools and offering advice and encouragement; that if these role models spoke directly to Pacific students in schools it would be hugely beneficial, both in terms of getting the information to them and also as a motivational tool. Most participants reported that because this was not available to them when they were going through secondary school, many of them entered university feeling isolated and having no idea of what was required of them if they were to succeed:

> It's just overwhelming you know, the amount of freedom that you had, but then at the same time it was like, kind of confusing, 'cause I didn't know what to expect. (Samoan female, age 25–30)

A few participants also reported that young Pacific students would be more receptive of information about tertiary education if their peers delivered the information. Programmes such as these would facilitate and nurture young Pacific students' interest and also encourage them to pursue tertiary study:

> I thought about it more in seventh form … but what I think would have helped, changed if someone from university like a student would have come over to talk about it … this is

> what I'm doing now … that's what I've experienced 'cause when I went through fourth and fifth year of med school, we had school trips to South Auckland schools … there was one particular school we went to and basically told Island students coming and there was about 15 of us university in number, and we all walked in there dressed casually and just looked from the street and if I had seen that in sixth form, seventh form, I could do this then that would have helped … I think it's different coming from teachers as well. (Cook Islands male, age 25–30)

A service like this would also inform Pacific students about what tertiary education about the possible downfalls that student life can present:

> a really difficult time for me not just 'cause I didn't have my parents, but I lost a lot of motivation … in college years I was really motivated where teachers always saying you have to do the work, whereas in university no one pushes you … if you don't do it, then that's your own problem … you fail. (Samoan female, age 25–30)

Concluding comments

This paper has drawn on a wide-ranging study investigating issues of participation in tertiary study for Pacific peoples in New Zealand. It provides a review of quantitative data that reveal participation patterns and issues surrounding the retention of Pasifika students through to course completion, and selects from a comprehensive set of qualitative data aimed at bringing the face of Pacific participation into a richer focus.

The study highlights the continuation of inequity of participation in tertiary education, and identifies a range of recurring themes with regard to retention. It offers evidence to support interpretations of the reasons for both withdrawal from and persistence with study programmes that are grounded in institutional approaches as well as personal, social and economic matters. The negative factors identified include motivation and attitudes, pressures from family groups, peer groups and finances, lack of support services and language issues, while the availability of Pasifika staff, promoting a Pasifika 'presence' in institutions and positive role models, together with appropriate pedagogy and readily available information, were all positive factors in increasing retention. The capacity of educational facilities to retain students is a function of the interface between student and institution and the institution and the community (Anderson *et al.*, 2004).

The study's contention that institutional responsibility is a key element in improving the retention of under-represented groups such as Pasifika in tertiary education, and the evidence on aspects of institutional ethos and strategies that supported or failed to support Pasifika success, gave rise to recommendations specifically focused on the need to direct institutional attention towards the enhancement of their interface with Pasifika students and Pasifika communities. The overall recommendation that Pasifika students' equitable access, retention and success should be established as an outcomes-based regulatory goal for all tertiary providers was put forward as a means of contributing to the concurrent government-led discussions on the need for a revitalized tertiary education system better able to provide the underpinnings of both a knowledge economy and a more equitable and inclusive society.

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