

Successful Outcomes for Maori First-Year Students

A work in progress

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Topic

This session will describe a set of critical elements and conditions that are closely associated with the attrition rate of Maori first-year students at Massey University. The findings have emerged from the Maori First-Year Student Advancement Project that was begun in 2006, and is a work in progress. The main conclusion to date is that it is in the best interests of the students and the University to require Maori first-year students to receive advice on their programme, papers and workload as early in the enrolment process as is possible. While Maori students are the focus of the Project, the literature supports this approach for all first-year students. Further, it would be unreasonable to place this restriction on one group in the student population.

This paper gives a brief description of the Project’s rationale, methods and key findings to date. The workshop presentation will give a summary of the key findings and feature video resources developed specifically for Maori first-year students. Included in this will be observations on Maori student patterns of participation and characteristics. For the second half of the session, participants will be invited to join the discussion.

Project Overview

The aim of the Project is to identify and examine critical elements and conditions that contribute to the successful learning experiences and outcomes of Maori first-year students at Massey University. Begun in 2006 as an initiative of the Office of the Assistant Vice-Chancellor (Maori & Pasifika), the Project was shaped by student trend data and guided by “voluminous and longstanding” retention literature¹.

The focus of the Project is on all Maori first-year students (approximately 850 or 25% of all Maori students). A strong emphasis has been placed on distance students as they comprise approximately 60% of all Maori first year students, and have a higher non-completion rate than campus-based students.

As mentioned above, Maori students are the Project’s focus group, but it is likely that the findings are readily applicable to many first-year students.

¹ Zepke, Leach & Prebble (October 2006).

National Context

Maori secondary school students² are less likely to leave school with university entrance requirements than non-Maori, comprising the largest student group of school-leavers with little or no formal attainment.³ The flow-on effect of this is that only one quarter of Maori first-year students at this University are school leavers, with most entering the University via adult admission status⁴.

The good news is that, once in the workforce, the income levels of Maori and non-Maori graduates are similar for graduates with bachelor degrees and higher⁵. Maori graduates are critical to the achievement of successful outcomes for both their own families and Maori families in general. The dire financial circumstances in which many Maori families live are clear indications of an urgent need to increase the numbers of Maori graduates.

In this country, tertiary institutions hold themselves responsible to assist with this growth. A priority aim at Massey University, for example, is the attainment of quality academic outcomes for Maori⁶. This project on Maori student advancement is one initiative of this priority aim.

Maori Student Profile

Of the eight New Zealand Universities, Massey University has the largest number of Maori students. Last year (2008), 3,234 Maori students were enrolled at the University (approximately 10% of all students). 25% of these students were enrolled in first-year undergraduate programmes. These students tend to study part-time, have a median age of 32 years, and come from a wide range of localities rather than a single region. Over one half of all Maori students at Massey University study off-campus.

Distance study opens the door to university study to people for whom on-campus study is not an option. The ability to study in one's own time and from the comfort of home has an obvious appeal. Our study has shown, however, that the challenges of distance study are less obvious.

Predictably, a significant number of first-year distance students, including Maori students, do not complete their first semester of study. The challenge for this University, and indeed for the tertiary sector, is to identify ways in which both they and the students can receive a better return on their investment.

² Tertiary students are required to declare their ethnicity on the enrolment form, and are able to identify up to three ethnicities. A student's primary ethnicity is calculated according to Statistics New Zealand Standard Classification of Ethnicity.

³ Ministry of Education Factsheet *Maori Senior Secondary Students Achievement 2004-2006*, October 2007. The report also shows that the gap is narrowing.

⁴ Students aged 20 years and over, and who have no formal education qualifications, may apply for adult entry.

⁵ Ministry of Education Factsheet *Maori Economic Outcomes from Tertiary*, February 2005

⁶ "Quality academic outcomes anticipate that Maori students who embark on a course of study at Massey University will achieve the best possible results with high rates of success. The focus moves beyond gaining access to university to completing papers and programmes of study with excellent grades. Moreover, by maximising avenues for study, student options will be increased with corresponding gains in academic qualifications." *Key Initiatives for a Maori Academic Investment Agenda at Massey University*, Office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Maori) July 2008.

The experiences of Maori first-year students across the University are mixed and vary by programme, location, mode and level of study and level of support⁷. Campus-based students in full-time programmes have higher pass rates than part-time and distance students. Students in pre-selected programmes also perform better than other students. Not surprisingly, students in scholarship-supported programmes have a very good pass rate. An excellent example of this is the Te Rau Puawai⁸ Maori mental health workforce development programme, which provides recipients with a fees scholarship and additional tutoring and mentoring programmes. This programme has a student pass rate of 85% to 90%. Interestingly, most Te Rau Puawai students study part-time and from a distance.

Research

A key reference point for this Project is the set of critical conditions (propositions) identified by our Massey University colleagues Zepke, Leach and Prebble (2003), in their synthesis of 146 international studies on student retention, namely that:

1. Academic counseling and pre-enrolment advice are readily available to ensure that students enrol into appropriate programmes and papers
2. The institution provides opportunities for students to establish social networks
3. Orientation/induction programs are provided to facilitate both social and academic integration
4. Peer tutoring and mentoring services are provided
5. Institutional behaviours, environment and processes are welcoming and efficient
6. Teachers are approachable and available for academic discussions
7. Students experience good quality teaching and manageable workloads
8. Students working in academic learning communities have good outcomes
9. A comprehensive range of institutional services and facilities are available
10. Supplementation instruction (SI) is provided
11. There is an absence of discrimination on campus, so students feel valued, fairly treated and safe
12. Institutional processes cater for diversity of learning preferences
13. The institutional culture, social and academic, welcomes diverse cultural capital and adapts to diverse students' needs.

To date, our Project has focused on the first four propositions.

The approach taken has been to gather critical information on Maori student participation patterns, while at the same time acting to affect positive changes for these students.

Project Initiatives

The four initiatives undertaken since the Project's inception in 2006 are:

1. **Course Advice & Planning (2006):** Early contact by staff with Maori first-year students at the beginning of semester in order to identify students with particular "at risk" characteristics, for early follow up contacts by Maori academic support staff.

⁷ Massey University Campuses are situated in Auckland, Palmerston North/Manawatu and Wellington.

⁸ Te Rau Puawai (blossoming of 100 [graduates]) is a joint venture between Massey University and Ministry of Health which provides financial and academic support to students enrolled in the broad area of mental health (Nursing, Social Work and Social Policy, Psychology, Rehabilitation, and Maori Studies). Established in 1999, the TRP goal of 100 graduates has been exceeded, with the current number at just over 200.

2. **Paper Advice and Tutoring (2006):** Modeled on the mentoring component of the Te Rau Puawai Programme, this project provided additional mentoring for Maori first-year distance students in three large 100-level core papers, each of which had relatively high rates of non-completion for distance students.
3. **Online Surveys of Maori students (2006-2007)** (all Maori students, all Maori first-year students and all Maori postgraduate students) in order to gather information on their expectations and experiences of the University.
4. **Course Planning & Advancement (2008-2010):** Early pro-active contact by staff with Maori first-year undergraduate students enrolled in business, humanities, social sciences and sciences programmes, in order to provide them with information and advice on: i) programme and paper choices; and ii) workload management skills. This is a work in progress.

Of these four initiatives, three involved close collaborations with a range of academic and student services on each of the University's three Campuses.

Project Findings

The **first cluster** of findings identified a set of characteristics that appeared to be common to Maori first-year students who did not complete one or more of their papers. Typically, these students:

- studied from a distance;
- remained in paid employment while studying;
- had an admission status of over 20 years and over (i.e. did not have requisite entry qualifications); and
- had enrolled in more than one paper in the first semester.

The **second cluster** of findings identified a set of common behaviours of non-completing students. Most students **had not**:

- received or sought advice from advisory staff prior to their enrolment;
- acted on the advice given by academic support staff on ways to manage their study-load
- responded to offers of ongoing contact from learning support staff;
- participated in a study group or community of learning;
- participated in a mentoring programme;
- attended an on-campus course for distance students
- heeded the advice from support staff to withdraw from a paper before the academic penalty date;
- made contact with staff after missing assignment submission dates.

These findings locate responsibility for non-completion with students. For its part, the institution has a comprehensive offer of student advisory and support services, and first-year students receive are inundated with this information. So why do most of our first-year students not use these services?

One simple explanation is that our first-year students are optimists, and feel equal to the requirements of study. At our initial contact with students, all appeared to be excited about their choice of programme and confident in their ability to manage the workload. Perhaps the notion of additional support does not sit well with optimists.

It would seem that the doctrine of caveat emptor is widely applied in the tertiary sector, with the onus placed on new students to have sufficient maturity and ability to realize the content and nature of their “purchase”. Nonetheless, without the benefit of sound advice, our first-year part-time students will typically take on a higher study-load than they can manage. They will also select papers that are not what they had anticipated.

With the current emphasis on retention, the institution would be advised to recognise that most students who are new to study do not have sufficient information to make wise and informed decisions. There is, of course, considerable support for early contact as a means of student retention. Seidman’s retention formula of $RET = E Id + [E + I + C]Iv$ (Retention equals Early Identification plus Early & Intensive Intervention) (1999) captures the essence of the early intervention approach. At this University, in programmes with pre-selection processes (such as nursing, teaching and fine arts), student retention rates are high. **Our findings strongly support an approach that requires all first-year students to receive advice on their programme, papers and workload prior to their programme confirmation.**

A further measure would be to limit the number of papers taken by first-year part-time students (with consideration given to students who have evidence of their ability to cope with more)⁹. In many programmes, first-year students who only have time to take one or two papers (mainly distance students) have the ability to enrol up to ten papers without any checks or stops. By contrast, first-year Te Rau Puawai bursars studying part-time are restricted to two papers only in their first semester.

The **third cluster of findings** is preliminary, and focuses on the University’s orientation activities provided for all first-year distance students.

Orientation workshops for distance students are managed by the Student Learning Centres on the three Campuses (in Auckland, Wellington and Palmerston North). Students who attend an orientation workshop rate them highly and attendance has increased significantly over the past few years. That said, the workshops are not compulsory and relatively few students attend. Teaching staff also orient students into their papers via their workbooks and interactive websites. The growth in interactive websites across the University should provide a more efficient means of orienting the majority of new students. We are currently developing a set of web-based resources specifically for Maori first-year students. The web-based information for students is very comprehensive, but Maori first-year students do not appear to access it. We have not researched the reasons for this, although anecdotal reports are that much of the information is too dense and static¹⁰. In response to this, we have attempted to produce a series of short video clips that will attract and maintain our first-year students’ attention. These will be evaluated and reviewed at the end of the second semester.

⁹ At this University, a fulltime study-load is eight or more papers per year. There are three semesters per year (including a shorter third semester in summer), though most students study in semesters one and two.

¹⁰ Improvements are currently being made to some of these web resources

Further observations

The Project is built around Maori students' first experiences of study. We know that this is a critical time for both the student and the University. Although we now have a useful profile of students who do not complete, more qualitative information on their experiences is required in order to accurately pinpoint areas that would benefit from intervention or improvement.

As mentioned earlier, we recognise that our Project has not touched on Zepke, Leach and Prebble's remaining nine propositions:

5. Institutional behaviours, environment and processes are welcoming and efficient
6. Teachers are approachable and available for academic discussions
7. Students experience good quality teaching and manageable workloads
8. Students working in academic learning communities have good outcomes
9. A comprehensive range of institutional services and facilities are available
10. Supplementation instruction (SI) is provided
11. There is an absence of discrimination on campus, so students feel valued, fairly treated and safe
12. Institutional processes cater for diversity of learning preferences
13. The institutional culture, social and academic, welcomes diverse cultural capital and adapts to diverse students' needs.

Staff approaches to student retention are many and varied; indeed this information would not be readily available anywhere in the University. Its size and spread has made it very difficult to develop a systematic and coordinated approach to student retention. According to the Education Policy Institute, a leading research organisation on student success in North America, this is a common characteristic of educational institutions:

“...most institutions do most of the right things to engage students and create a successful climate on campus (even if that campus is virtual). Where institutions fall short is in the following areas:

First, they don't always know what they are doing for students. Because the campus is a large organism, we are not always cognizant of the many strategies in use at any particular time, and this is problematic when trying to improve the institution.

Second, we often don't know how successful these strategies are in practice. They all make sense in theory, but do they work for your students?

Third, do these strategies get to the students that need the support? Just because the institution “does it,” certainly does not mean that students with the greatest need “get it.”¹¹

The University's evaluations of students' experiences of course work and services aim to identify current strengths and weaknesses. This, combined with ongoing improvements in student administration, support and e-learning systems, are promising indications of an institution-wide commitment to student learning.

¹¹ Institutional Student Retention Assessment (ISRA) Program Manual EDI www.isra-online.com

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