

A hard waka to paddle: providing culturally appropriate and effective learning support for first year Māori and Pasifika Arts students

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Abstract

He moanapukepuke e kengia e te waka - a choppy sea can be navigated

Despite a history of ongoing government directives and educational programmes, the belief that tertiary institutions are now more suited to meet the learning needs of all students is still a shaky waka (canoe) to paddle. The reality is that many indigenous students still enter tertiary study with well-founded trepidation and many become dispirited or lost along the way. This is certainly the experience for many Māori and Tāngata Pasifika (people of Pacific descent) in tertiary education in Aotearoa New Zealand. In 2004 the Faculty of Arts at the University of Auckland created the Tuākana Arts Programme to provide mentoring and learning support for all first year Māori and Pasifika students. This paper outlines the Tuākana programme and considers its strategies and cultural 'fit' within the other first year support structures in the faculty.

Introduction

As can be seen from the table below, in 1999, only 10% of the New Zealand population over the age of 15 held a bachelors or higher qualification which increased to 17% by 2009. During this same period, the proportion of Māori with a bachelors or higher qualification increased from 2.7% to 7.5%. Pasifika students, although starting with a higher representation than Maori in this group in 1999 with 3.5% in 1999 did not match the same rate of increase as Maori by 2009 and achieved only 5.9% in 2009.

Percentage increase of NZ Population 15+ with bachelors or higher qualification			
	1999	2009	Increase %
Percentage of all NZ population 15+	10%	17%	7%
Maori	2.7%	7.5%	5%
Pasifika	3.5%	5.9%	2.4%

In 2010 Māori EFTS (equivalent full time student) made up 9.1% of the Faculty of Arts population, Pasifika students 12.1%, European/Pākehā 51.3% and the rapidly growing Asian enrolment 23%. If we look at the breakdown at undergraduate level in the Faculty per student (not EFTS) there are approximately 2,500 students who identify themselves as Māori or Pasifika which is around a quarter of the Pākehā headcount and about a third less than Asian students. In reality this means that Māori and Pasifika students will always be in the minority in any classroom situation and many of the learning barriers they experienced through compulsory schooling may well be the same at tertiary level.

In Ministry of Education strategic paper, 'Ka Hikitia – Managing Success: The Māori Education Strategy 2008-2012, refers to the research of John Hattie with regard to the success of Māori students in compulsory schooling. Rather than identify socio-economic factors as had been the norm in the past, Hattie concluded that this was not the factor that had the most significant impact on the success of Māori students. He believes that the relationship between teachers and Māori students is the major issue, "it is a matter of cultural relationships not socio-economic factors"¹. Many of these students do not make it through to tertiary study but those who do by achieving the minimum entry rank score or through special admission often find the learning and cultural environment impersonal and alienating.

The University of Auckland Strategic Plan 2005-2012 makes it clear that the University is "committed to the mutual rights and obligations articulated by Te Tiriti o Waitangi" and through this commitment to the Treaty it seeks "to promote Māori presence and participation in all aspects of University life, and encouraging teaching, learning, and research in a range of fields important to Māori"². The Strategic Plan also acknowledges the significance of the University's location in Auckland, the largest Pacific city in the world which "both necessitates and provides opportunities for a particular relationship with Pacific peoples". These statements signal that the University deems it important to

¹ John Hattie, in Ka Hikitia- Managing for Success: The Maori Education Strategy 2008-2010, Ministry of Education, Wellington, 2007

² University of Auckland Strategic Plan 2005-2012

engage with Pacific communities and to continue “the strengthening and deepening of relationships which will contribute further to the intellectual, social, economic and cultural advancement of Pacific peoples.”³

It is how to constructively acknowledge this commitment to the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi and put the aims of the University’s strategic policy with regard to Māori and Pasifika students into practice that is the focus of this paper.

Māori and Pasifika Achievement Rates

In the first year of study in the Faculty of Arts, Pasifika students have the lowest Student Pass Rate (SPR) of the major ethnic groups with their fail rate three times higher than that of Pākehā (European) students. Māori have just under double the fail rate of Pākehā. The most telling statistic is the DNS (Did Not Sit) rate where, in comparison to Pākehā students, Māori are nearly twice as likely to fail through not sitting examinations and Pasifika students three times more likely to return a DNS grade. This trend is corroborated in a 2007 government report (Ministry of Education, 2007) which notes that Pasifika students contribute the greatest growth in the tertiary sector, increasing by 22% since 2001, but these students are less likely to "stay enrolled and/or complete their tertiary qualifications than any other ethnic group."

Maori Undergraduate performance

Earle’s report, mentioned above, is a very practical document which usefully identifies some key points which influences Māori undergraduate performance across the whole tertiary sector.

Earle’s findings reveal that:

- Maori students are less likely to pass all of their courses in the first year than non-Maori
- Males are less likely than females to pass all their courses
- Maori students are more likely to drop out after one year than non-Maori and are less likely to complete their degree.

The report goes on to identify factors which determine success for Maori at university:

- Key factors for first-year success are likely to be a set of institutional, personal and external influences
- Passing 75 percent or more of courses is a key determinant of remaining in study and completing a qualification
- **The main intervention point to support students to succeed appears to be in the first semester in the first year of study⁴.**

The final point above is the most crucial for setting up a successful support framework and has a strong influence on many of the strategies employed in the Tuākana programme.

³ University of Auckland Strategic Plan 2005-2012

⁴ My bold

Tuākana Arts Programme

Tuākana is the largest equity programme in the faculty. It is designed to understand and respond to the range of cultural factors that Māori and Pasifika students may experience when they study at university. The programme offers stage one students a culturally friendly environment with Tuākana mentors (high achieving senior undergraduate or post graduate Māori and Pasifika students) who provide pastoral and academic support. The focus of this programme is retention, particularly during the transition from school to university. At the same time it seeks to foster an understanding of academic performance to provide undergraduate students with a higher level of further study and employment options.

Tuākana also provides support for transition into postgraduate study. The characteristics and needs of this cohort are slightly different, although the strongly Māori and Pacific cultural framework is a strong theme throughout all Arts equity support programmes. At this level interventions are aimed toward increasing retention and successful completion and building networks amongst students that support these objectives.

Tuākana Strategies

1. Face to face – establishing a more personal relationship as soon as possible in the semester, clarifying expectations, raising aspirations. This is particularly important for Māori and Pasifika Targeted Admissions Students (TAS) who are provided Special Admission (SPA) entry.
2. Providing teaching support and resources – Tuakana mentors, academic skills workshops and retreats, targeted specific support e.g. wananga/fono (weekend retreats at the marae before major assignments and examinations)
3. Cultural space – providing quiet study space as well as social space to connect students with each other. Provide culturally friendly events which encourage Maori and Pasifika right across the faculty to join together and encourage participation and academic achievement
4. Organising student and parent sessions at key Auckland secondary schools with staff a students who speak a range of Pacific languages. These are to encourage wider recruitment but also to provide Pacific parents with strategies as to how to support their son or daughter when they are studying at University.

This Presentation

This paper will establish the framework of the Tuākana programme and consider some of the key strategies from the list above. It will then discuss with the group some of the important issues which first year Māori and Pasifika students may have in common with other indigenous tertiary students.

The presentation will be interspersed with interview bites from mentors and Tuākana students from a recently completed documentary on the Tuakana programme.

Session Plan

- 5 minutes: Outline and goals: Tuākana undergraduate programme
- 2.5 minutes: Documentary soundbite from Tuākana students
- 5 minutes: Successful strategies for Māori and Pasifika first year students
- 2.5 minutes: Documentary soundbite: Tuākana mentor
- 15 minutes: Group discussion

Possible questions/issues for the audience

- What are the major barriers to indigenous student success at transition from school to university?
- The range of academic achievement competencies of indigenous students.
- What are the criticisms or weaknesses of providing ethnically specific support?
- How do you ensure that the students who most need the support enrol in the programme?
- How do you ensure indigenous teaching support is not equated with 'remedial' services?
- How can you provide for target equity groups within wider faculty teaching support or first year programmes?

References

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