

A Pacific based approach to supporting the wider participation of Pacific peoples in higher education

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Abstract

This presentation will highlight some exemplars that are used by the Pacific Team at Unitec to support the wider participation of Pacific people in higher education. The term participation is used in this presentation firstly to refer to Pacific peoples enrolling into a tertiary programme and secondly to refer to the participation of families and communities in the higher education learning and journeys of their families and community members. The Pacific concept of 'fanau' is adopted to inform the two initiatives used as exemplars in this presentation. The 'fanau' concept is based around the family and the community and its strength lies within the collective emphasis. The two exemplars that will be used in this presentation are first, 'The Pacific Orientation' and second, the 'Fanau Evening(s)'.

Introduction

This presentation will highlight two exemplars. The first is the 'Pacific orientation' and second is the 'fanau evening'. The two exemplars are used by the team at the Pacific Centre for Learning, Teaching and Research (Pacific Centre) at Unitec Institute of Technology to support the wider participation of Pacific Peoples in higher education. Pacific Peoples in the context of this presentation includes descendants of island nations of Polynesia, Micronesia and Melanesia. Unitec Institute of Technology is located in Auckland New Zealand and has a very diverse student population. The Pacific Centre provides both academic and pastoral support for all Pacific students and at all levels of their studies. However, a special focus is given to first year students.

The concept of participation has many meanings but in the context of this presentation it refers to the participation of Pacific Peoples in the tertiary sector not only through student enrolment into programmes but also to the participation of families in the educational journeys of their students. Anae, Anderson, Bensen & Coxon (2002) in their work on Pacific Peoples in tertiary education identified three levels or degrees of participation. The first involves enrolment in the various tertiary programmes; the second covers completion/non-completion of programmes and third, deals with analysis of performance. While they correctly highlighted the significance of the three components to any analysis of participation, what is missing is the component of fanau/family and community participation in the discussion.

This presentation therefore draws on initiatives adopted by Pacific staff at the Unitec Pacific Centre as means of enabling participation of Pacific families in the journeys of their family member(s) in higher education. In the two exemplars used in this presentation, the Pacific concept of 'fanau' is adopted to inform the two initiatives. The 'fanau' concept is based

around the family, the community and its strength lies within its collective or communal emphasis (Talakai, 2000). *Fanau* is literally translated to mean children, family (both extended and nuclear family) or community. The collective and communal emphasis of '*fanau*' is underpinned by values of love, respect and reciprocal obligations. Therefore, the notion of community does not stray far from the concept of the 'Pacific family' and can be considered an extension of the Pacific family, especially so in diasporic communities where the notion of community whether it be Samoan community, Tongan community or Fijian community has great significance and value. These traditions stem from the islands where Pacific people would perform customs as a family, as a village and as a community (Tuafuti & MacCaffery, 2005). Therefore, customs and traditions such as weddings, funerals and cultural performances are all done as a community and as a community everyone participates and contributes. This is relayed to the family environment where everyone contributes to the household.

Pacific values and traditions are still practised in the Pacific communities in the diaspora and also contribute to social, economic, health and educational solutions and initiatives for Pacific peoples. For instance, the '*fanau*' approach has been used in higher educational settings in New Zealand to put in place support mechanisms for Pacific students. This is because of its familiarity to Pacific students (Pasikale & Tupuola, 1999). Through this approach there is an acknowledgement of collective learning in contrast to individual learning. Collective learning enables Pacific students to have a sense of belonging as higher educational settings are often quite foreign to them (Hill & Hawk, 1996).

As mentioned earlier, the rationale discussed here has been adopted in educational settings in New Zealand to inform some of the initiatives used to engage Pacific students (Manuatu, 2000). The 'Pacific Orientation' is provided for first year students while the '*Fanau* Evening' is an information evening put in place for families and community members. Therefore, the '*fanau* concept' reinforces the significant role that family and community plays in the lives of the individuals because the individual is seen as a part of not only the family but also the community (Thompson, McDonald, Talakai, Taumopeau & Te Ava, 2010; Biddulph, Biddulph & Biddulph, 2003).

Pacific Orientation

The notions of collectivism and community inherent to Pacific communities in Aotearoa necessitate a Pacific Orientation. There are those who would question the need for a separate Pacific orientation given that there is a duplication of some of the information that students receive in a mainstream, faculty based orientation. There are two main reasons why the Pacific Centre runs its own orientation. First, it is to build within the first year Pacific students a sense of community and second, to 'hook' Pacific students into the Pacific Centre which helps to build a relationship with them so that they might be better supported academically, physically, mentally and spiritually. Tinto (1993) highlights the importance of community membership in order to increase student persistence. Even though this community would be considered a sub-culture when compared to the dominant culture of an institution, the fact students make a connection and possibly become a part of it is important. Community membership helps to prevent feelings of isolation that can often be felt by Pacific students in what are often large, impersonal and bureaucratic institutions (Moxley, Najor-Durack & Dumbrigue, 2001).

The Pacific orientation is in fact a lot like the faculty based orientations in many ways in that students are provided with the basic important pieces of information that they need to survive their first year on campus: the nuts-and-bolts of tertiary student life focussing on topics such as where to access the various resources, where to find help for assignments and academic support (the Pacific Centre has in-house academic support), where the gym is and the best places to eat on campus and so forth. By providing information about how they can access all the resources available on campus, it is hoped that the Pacific orientation can have an impact on Pacific students' retention (Tuagalu, & Togiamua, 2004). There is, however, more to this orientation than just an information dump. Emphasis is put into giving the students opportunities through ice-breaker activities and group challenges to form relationships with other Pacific students from other academic disciplines to overcome isolation issues where they may be the only Pacific person in their class. These are relationships that might not otherwise be formed. As well as the building a sense of Pacific student community and collectivism, the orientation serves to build and reinforce the Pacific Centre's role within the wider Unitec community.

The role of the Pacific Centre in the life of a first year Pacific student and student community is a vital one. The Pacific Centre has the capacity to support Pacific students in all aspects of their student life. This includes, but is not limited to, academic support, pastoral care, mentoring, counselling, advocacy and providing a physical space where Pacific students can 'belong'. A Pacific specific support centre is important as more often than not Pacific students (and the same can be said for other minority groups) do not access mainstream services (Hawkins & Larabee, 2009). The Pacific Centre also focuses on enhancing a sense of community by helping to facilitate faculty based initiatives to widen the scope of this idea of community which is to include family, *aiga* (Samoan extended family) and *fanau*. The Pacific orientation is a crucial first step in this relationship.

Fanau Evening

A *Fanau* evening is organised by individual Unitec departments in partnership with the Pacific Centre. The focus of the '*fanau* evening' is to bring families and their first year students into the students' individual area of study. It provides the opportunity for families and friends to meet the Pacific Lecturers and other staff from their area of study. In addition, the first year students and their family members are able to meet other students from the department and Unitec support services that are available to them whilst studying. They also get to meet other support networks from the community who have an affiliation or are specialised within the student's area of learning. This allows the student's family and friends to observe the environment that they would be studying in and build relationships with one another.

A typical programme for a '*fanau* evening' would include a variety of speakers which begins with a welcome from the senior management of the Faculty that the department sits under, and then leading into a dinner after the speeches. Food plays a big part in Pacific peoples' lives as it is a gesture of hospitality. After the dinner, this is followed by a department specific session, in which the Head of Department and Programme Directors will provide information on the work involved within their area of learning. The information provided enlightens families and friends on the commitment and expectations required for study.

Following this session, a Pacific person from that area of study, or someone who is distinguished and inspirational, would be selected as a guest speaker to motivate and encourage students, and their families and friends, in tertiary study. Also included in the line up of speakers would be third year students or graduates from the programme who are asked to speak about their own journeys through their studies. The evening then concludes with introductions of other support services available on campus to reaffirm messages that they have received during orientation.

This event has been developed to provide a holistic approach of not only presenting information and support to students but also including and affirming the *fanau* contribution to the students study life. The *Fanau* evening is an opportunity for discussions around the life of a student. So, the main objective of the *fanau* evenings is to make sure that families are fully aware of the commitment, expectations, responsibilities and pressures that their loved ones will face on the academic journey are embarking on. We feel that this is beneficial for Pacific families in particular, as there is the tendency for Pacific students to have other commitments and responsibilities outside of their study. This form of evening can enlighten the students' families regarding the support that they require. In addition, the *Fanau* evening provides an opportunity for family members to ask any questions to gain further understanding of the area of study that their loved ones will be undertaking and to share their thoughts on how to create the ideal balance required for tertiary study. It has been observed that Pacific students who receive great support from their families tend to remain and complete their studies (Tupuola, 2004). Pacific students require not an individual approach, but very much a collaborative effort from everyone involved in their lives.

The focus of these two Pacific Centre strategies is to build on the already strong values of family/fanau and collectivity that Pacific people hold. The Pacific orientation is the genesis of the new Pacific community that they will belong to within the context of the larger institutional community, and the Fanau evening is the strengthening of that community by the inclusion of students' families. Modern educational institutions are no longer institutions that have the same kind of student i.e. male, heterosexual and Christian. Given the diversity that exists, especially in Aotearoa, institutions cannot just continue to do the same thing and expect similar results (Harper & Quaye, 2009).

Session Outline:

Introduction – Video (5 mins)

Brief background to the Pacific

Interviews with students

Presenters - Pasifika First Year Initiatives: Pacific Orientation and Fanau Evening (6 mins)

Introduce and Outline Pacific Orientation (3 mins)

Introduce and Outline Fanau Evening (3 mins)

Group Discussion – Small groups to consider two proposed questions (8 mins)

Question One: *Is there a place for ethnic specific initiatives in the modern academic institution?*

Question Two: *How critical is the involvement of the family in the success and retention of students?*

Presenters & Whole Group Discussion – Draw together the ideas from participants (8 mins)

Wrap up - Video (2 mins)

Commentary from students about Pacific Orientation and Fanau Evening

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