

## **Bucking the Trends: Increasing retention rates of Māori students enrolled in Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences courses at the University of Waikato**

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Figures from the Ministry of Education (2002a) show that there has been a steady increase in Māori tertiary enrolments, from 1994 (20,201) to 2000 (29,513), with Māori comprising 14% of all tertiary enrolments. Although, there has been growth in enrolment figures, this growth has been attributed primarily to growth in attendance at wananga. Māori are less likely to study at university during the core tertiary ages of 18-24. As of July 2001, 6.9% of Māori aged 18-24 were enrolled at university, compared with 22.8% for non-Māori. The Ministry of Education (2002a) also reported that Māori are more likely to be enrolled in lower level programmes of study: in 2000, 66.6% of all Māori tertiary students were enrolled in diploma or certificate programmes compared to the 33.4% who were enrolled in degree or post-graduate programmes.

### **Successful Participation**

A number of factors have been identified as affecting the successful participation of Māori students in tertiary education<sup>1</sup>. These include the transition

and adaptation to unfamiliar tertiary environments and tertiary study, inappropriate support systems, financial barriers, unwelcoming educational environments, lack of social and/or academic support, and racism. It has been noted that no one factor can be attributed to unsuccessful participation, as it is the complex interaction of a multitude of factors that lead to poor outcomes within tertiary education.

A number of studies have commented on tertiary educational institutions being alien, unwelcoming, or hostile for indigenous and minority students. Mention is also made of the high number of Māori students who are first generation participants in tertiary education, for whom adjusting to the practices and rules of a tertiary environment, without the support of whānau, is particularly difficult. A number of models of tertiary retention are based on the premise that social and academic integration into tertiary education systems require (at least to some extent) separation, on the part of the students, from the norms of past communities, and transition and incorporation into the new tertiary system. However, such models have been questioned on the basis that the underlying assumption of these models appears to be that those from cultural backgrounds which are different to that of the dominant institution, need to assimilate into the institution, and that institutionalised attitudes rely on students' assimilating to the culture of academia. It has been argued that this assumption needs to alter if the experiences of students are to be altered.

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<sup>1</sup> In 2002 the Māori and Psychology Research Unit from the University of Waikato undertook an evaluation of Te Rau Puawai Workforce 100. A component of that evaluation was a comprehensive literature review focused on issues of relevance to Māori participation in tertiary institutions. Given that this is the most recent literature review of this area, the key issues identified in that review have been summarised below. Please note that any of the information included in this section should not be sourced to this report. Please refer to *Nikora, L. W., Levy, M., Henry, J., Whangapirita, L. (2002). An evaluation of Te Rau Puawai Workforce 100: Technical Report Volume 2. Hamilton, New Zealand: Māori and*

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Concepts of dual socialisation and biculturalism seriously challenge assumptions of separation, transition, and incorporation: the proposition being that individuals should not totally separate themselves from one culture, but instead should be supported to transit between two cultures. In relation to this, the critical role of the institution cannot be overstated. However, it is often lessened in retention and participation studies. International literature has found that successful minority students are those able to create the personal, environmental, academic, and social supports required to negotiate the tertiary environment. It is important to note that the ability to create these supports does not rest with the individual student, but also with the institution in facilitating the development of such supports. The specific forms of support identified include cultural mediators, role models, mentors, ethnic enclaves, learning communities, and support services.

### **Implementation of the Faculty Monitoring and Support Initiative**

#### *Background*

This initiative was funded by a Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS) Supplementary Funding Grant allocation, and was undertaken by the Māori and Psychology Research Unit. The aim was to implement a support system in the FASS that would enhance retention rates for Māori students in the Faculty. Currently, there are a number of different support systems provided by various departments in the FASS (e.g., the Kaupapa Māori tutorial system in the Department of Psychology). However, there has not been a centralised system of support for Māori students provided in the Faculty.

#### *Implementation*

A monitoring and support system for Māori students enrolled in selected first year FASS courses was trialled in the second (B) semester of 2002. This system involved contacting Māori students by phone, at regular intervals throughout the semester: with the specific purpose of checking on progress, identifying issues of relevance to their academic progress,

identifying and suggesting strategies to deal with those issues, and providing a service to help students access the existing sources of assistance within their specific courses and Departments. Students' contact telephone details were provided to the project team by the FASS, who deemed that the student contact details were being used within the parameters for which they had been provided, that is, the provision of academically focused services.

Prior to implementation, consultation was undertaken with key FASS staff members such as the Dean and relevant course co-coordinators. The purpose of this consultation was to explain the proposed system and identify any resources required. For example: the provision of course outlines; the identification of the support services available such as tutors, lecturers, and/or course coordinators; and the provision of time for the project team to attend initial course lectures to inform students about the implementation of this support system for Māori students. The information provided to students within lectures included an explanation of why and how the support system was being implemented, the nature of the support being provided (i.e., phone contact), and that participation was voluntary.

The project team consisted of a supervisor, project co-ordinator, and two research assistants. The project co-ordinator, who was responsible for the overall management of the project, was a Māori graduate student from the Māori and Psychology Research Unit. The research assistants were Māori students who had completed at least first and second year level study, preferably in the specific FASS courses targeted. Groups of students were allocated to each research assistant, if possible on the basis that they had completed specific courses, although this could not be achieved in all cases. To assist the research assistants in providing the necessary information and referral strategies to students, they were provided with an information pack consisting of the course outlines, course details, support services available in specific departments, and the support services available campus wide, for example, Disability Support Services, and the Teaching and Learning

Development Unit. Decisions regarding when to contact students were made on the basis of the assessment due dates for each course, with the majority of students being contacted a week prior to an assessment due date. The rationale for this timing was to ensure that students were progressing with their assessments, and, should they be having difficulties, were getting advice on any necessary strategies.

The aim was for each student to be contacted three times throughout the semester. The first cycle of calls were made at least a week prior to the first assessment due date, the second cycle were made directly after the mid-semester break, and the final calls were made towards the end of the semester prior to exams and final assessment due dates. Each call to students was based on a standardised interview schedule. The first call included informing students of the research and gaining their verbal consent to participate. The final call to students included questions aimed at evaluating the monitoring and support system. For each cycle of calls a maximum of three attempts were made to contact each student. Despite this, a number of students were unable to be contacted.

### Findings

A total of 3377 students were enrolled in FASS courses for 2002, of which 608 identified as Māori. Out of this 608, 462 Māori students were enrolled in first year/level one courses in the FASS. This project targeted 'B' semester level one courses in Anthropology, English, Geography, Political Sciences, and Psychology. These courses were selected due to the relatively high number of Māori students enrolled in them. There were a total of 212 enrolments in these courses by Māori students<sup>2</sup>. The total number of Māori students enrolled in Semester B level one courses was 195. The total number of Māori students targeted by this project was 182, representing 93% of the total number of Māori students enrolled in Semester B

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<sup>2</sup> This is the number of enrolments as opposed to the actual numbers of Māori students. Number of enrolments is higher than the actual numbers of Māori students due to enrolment in more than one course.

level one courses. The majority of students participating in this initiative were first year students, although a small number of students taking 100 level courses were second year, third year, or graduate students

In Call Cycles 1 and 2, approximately 41% of the total students enrolled in the targeted courses were contacted. This decreased significantly in Call Cycle 3 to 27%. The major reason for 'no contact' was that the research assistants received no answer on three separate attempts to contact the students. A contributing factor was that being predominantly first year students, a high number of students targeted by this initiative were residing in the Halls of Residence. Thus, they were dependent on a communal telephone system. These students proved particularly difficult to access. Other reasons for no contact included: no telephone number provided on the enrolment forms held by the FASS; contact details provided by the FASS being out of date; students withdrawing from courses; and students choosing not to participate in the monitoring and support system.

The noticeable decline in contact made with students in Call Cycle 3 was attributed primarily to the policy that if no contact had been made with students in both Call Cycles 1 and 2, then no further attempt would be made to contact these students in Call Cycle 3. A further reason, which may have made it harder to contact students in Call Cycle 3, was the additional workload faced by students at the end of courses, for example, pending exams and the submission of final assessments for courses. In addition, due to an administrative error, a research assistant did not attempt to contact a small group of students in Call Cycle 3.

Fifteen students choose not to participate. In general, the majority of these students were not first year students, and reported that they were confident academically and had good support networks (such as family members or peers who were also studying above the 100 level). Although choosing not to participate, the majority stated they supported the monitoring and support system for first year students.

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### *Issues reported by students*

Six themes were identified by the students as having impacted on their ability to successfully complete their assessment tasks. These were:

1. A lack of familiarity with the academic environment and the terminology used
2. A lack of confidence in accessing available resources e.g., tutors/lecturers
3. A lack of support
4. Timetable clashes
5. Problems with academic planning
6. 'Other' problems including health and external commitments, e.g., family commitments.

The most salient issues raised were the lack of familiarity with the terminology used in the academic environment, and being unsure of who the appropriate people were to contact for assistance, how to contact them, and where they could found.

### *Strategies reported by students*

Students were asked to describe the strategies which they had implemented to help address the factors that were impacting on their ability to successfully complete their academic tasks. Six key themes emerged, these being:

1. access to, and effective utilisation of, the resources provided by tutors/lecturers
2. effective time management skills
3. utilising peer, tutor, and/or lecturer support
4. obtaining scholarship information
5. obtaining academic planning advice
6. other strategies such as effectively managing an academic workload together with external commitments (such as family and becoming ill).

The most common strategy was being able to access and effectively utilise the academic resources available to them. Students also reported being appreciative of peer and tutor assistance, particularly for issues such as improving study skills. The assistance provided by this monitoring and support strategy, in terms of being reminded about pending assessment due dates, and generally having someone available to provide advice relevant to successful study and course planning, was also seen as beneficial by the majority of students contacted.

### *Who did we refer students to?*

An important component of this initiative was the referral of students to support services available within the University. The primary support services students were referred to were:

- Course staff (e.g., course coordinators, lecturers, and tutors)
- Library tutorials
- The Teaching and Learning Development Unit (TLDU)
- Health and counselling services
- Academic planning services (e.g., the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences Office).

The majority of referrals occurred in the first call cycle and were predominantly focused on encouraging students to access course coordinators, lecturers, and tutors. In addition, some students were also encouraged to access services such as the TLDU for assistance with writing, study, efficient time management skills, and medical or counselling services. On being informed of such services, some students reported that they were unaware these services could be accessed free of charge.

### *Student views on the monitoring and support initiative*

All 49 students who were contacted in Call Cycle 3 reported that this initiative was beneficial and useful. The students reported that the reminders for assessment due dates, the advice provided in relation to contacting specific people (course coordinators, lecturers, and tutors), and the advice provided in relation to institutional processes such as requests for information regarding extensions, incompletes<sup>3</sup>, and/or withdrawals, were all helpful. A number of students also reported that the implementation of this strategy demonstrated that FASS were genuinely interested in their successful progress, and had assisted in providing them with a sense of belonging to the Faculty. In addition, students reported that the research assistants, being past students in the papers that they were currently enrolled in, assisted in encouraging and fostering an ongoing

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<sup>3</sup> An incomplete, or IC, grade, is allocated when a student fails to fulfill a course's requirements with respect to the completion of compulsory assessment items.

relationship. Some students viewed this as a motivator to complete pending assessments and to act on the advice provided, particularly in relation to accessing the information available from the staff in their courses.

### **Discussion**

#### *Success of the monitoring and support system*

All the students who were contacted were unanimous in their support for this initiative, pass rates increased slightly, and fail rates decreased slightly: suggesting that the implementation of this initiative was successful. However, the initiative was primarily aimed at decreasing the 'incomplete' rate for Māori students: the data obtained shows a 6% increase in the numbers of Māori students who recorded 'incomplete' as a grade from 2001 to 2002. It is important to note that this small, tightly focused, initiative was a pilot project and did not control for external variables such as the provision of extra support systems, or alterations in the levels of existing support systems offered by the various Departments. Therefore, it is difficult to offer conclusive explanations for movements in fail, pass, and incomplete rates. Essentially the data from this project is a snapshot in time, presenting an overall picture from which inferences can be made. To ascertain the specific trends which are occurring, further monitoring and analysis of specific Departments' course data is required across a number of years.

Whilst recognising that limited conclusions can be drawn, it can be suggested that this initiative did serve to reliably address a number of key issues relevant to the retention of Māori students in tertiary education. The literature reports that multiple factors can impact on successful participation by Māori students in tertiary education, including the transition and adaptation to unfamiliar tertiary environments and tertiary study, inappropriate support systems, unwelcoming educational environments, and the lack of social and/or academic support. These issues can be particularly salient in students first year of study. The monitoring and support system implemented in the FASS was focused

specifically on addressing these issues. The data collected clearly indicates that issues such as unfamiliarity with the environment and tertiary study were salient for first year Māori students studying within the FASS, and the strategies reported by students and suggested by the research assistants were focused primarily on ways of addressing these issues.

#### *Facilitating Access to Necessary Resources*

From the data collected, there were two key themes which appeared to be of particular importance. The first was that to increase the level of support provided to Māori students, referrals needed to be made to the relevant course convenors, lecturers, tutors, or support services. An outcome of this strategy was that students appeared to gain the confidence to directly access those resources vital to their successful participation in courses. It appeared to be well understood that the role of the research assistant was not to resolve issues for students, but to provide the necessary information and strategies so that students were, on an ongoing basis, able to access the resources they needed themselves.

The view that it is of vital importance to provide this type of support for first year students, was supported by the fact that the majority of those who choose not to participate in the support and monitoring system were at a higher level of study, and were confident in negotiating the university environment. This indicates that Māori students participating within this tertiary institution for the first time require a specific and focused type of support, which differs from the support required by students engaged at higher levels of study. The data from this project indicate that first and second year Māori students particularly benefit from support focused on building their confidence in accessing the resources necessary for successful study.

Enhancing access to resources through the provision of information and increasing confidence is important. However, it is critical to note that the support system does not only consist of the provision of referral strategies. Its success is particularly reliant on both academic and administrative Faculty staff recognising and understanding the particular challenges faced by first and

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second year Māori students (in terms of negotiating the tertiary environment) and being committed to addressing those challenges.

### *Genuine Interest in the Success of Māori Students*

The second theme to arise was that the presence of the support and monitoring system assisted in promoting a sense of belonging to the FASS and the university for Māori students. This is best highlighted by a comment from one student that the “implementation of the strategy demonstrated that the FASS was genuinely interested in Māori students being successful within their courses”. This is an important finding, as it is clear from the literature that unwelcoming and hostile tertiary education environments are a significant barrier to participation by indigenous students. It appears critical that if the FASS is to enhance successful participation by Māori students, then it needs to work to create an environment that is visibly active in genuinely welcoming, encouraging, and celebrating the success of Māori students.

### *What can staff in the FASS do now?*

This report has focused on the implementation of a specific monitoring and support system. Whilst, recommendations for the further implementation of this initiative are discussed in more detail below, the project highlighted that there are a number of tools that all Faculty staff members can utilise to address the challenges faced by first and second year Māori students. Primarily, these tools can address issues relating to the transition and adaptation of students to unfamiliar tertiary environments and tertiary study, unwelcoming educational environments, and a lack of social and/or academic support.

As a starting point it is important that staff are aware of how issues of unfamiliarity and unwelcoming tertiary environments can impact on a student’s confidence to access both teaching and administrative staff for necessary information. It is also essential to recognise that the first year for Māori students appears critical in determining ongoing

success within the tertiary institution. Successful participation at first year level provides a firm foundation, not only in that students complete 100 level papers and are able to move to 200 level, but also in terms of the development of skills required to successfully negotiate the tertiary environment in subsequent years.

Recognising and understanding the impact of the issues described above can aid staff in identifying simple strategies for 100 and 200 level courses. Such strategies may include:

- Ensuring that course requirement information is clear and consistent: with particular attention given to emphasising the staff who are available to provide assistance
- Actively encouraging and welcoming students to utilise the skills and knowledge of the staff
- Being approachable
- Being clear about course requirements, how students can avoid an “incomplete” grade
- Where to seek help if students are having trouble
- Where to go if they need to seek an extension
- Actively encouraging students to seek that help if necessary.

The tools described above are not exceptionally special and are already utilised to some extent by staff. It is also evident that these are tools can be utilised by all staff to support Māori students and are in no way limited to use by only Māori staff in FASS. However, it is possible that what has not previously been recognised is their critical importance, and how additional emphasis on these issues can potentially make a huge impact on the lives and success of Māori students within the FASS.

### **Conclusion**

It has been found that successful minority students are those who are able to create the personal, environmental, academic, and social supports required to negotiate the tertiary environment. However, the important point is made that the responsibility for creating such supports does not rest solely with the individual

student through adaptation and assimilation, but also with the institution in facilitating the development of such supports and the creation of an environment that welcomes Māori students. This simple support and monitoring initiative, based on literature which has identified issues of unfamiliarity and unwelcoming tertiary environments as barriers to successful participation for Māori students, is one way of facilitating the development of support for first and second year Māori students.

It is important to emphasise that no one factor can be attributed to unsuccessful participation, as it is a complex interaction of a variety of factors that leads to poor outcomes. The monitoring and support initiative is a simple form of support which can operate successfully within the Faculty. However, the success of such an initiative is dependent on the commitment displayed by individual departments to its implementation and to ensuring that Māori students are well supported within individual courses.

### References

Ministry of Education. (2002a). Nga Haeata Mātauranga: Annual Report on Māori Education 2000/2001 and Direction for 2002. Wellington: Ministry of Education Group Māori.

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