

# Pacific Peoples in Tertiary Education in Aotearoa New Zealand

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## Abstract

Even though Pacific peoples in tertiary education in Aotearoa New Zealand strive to achieve milestones which bring honour and prestige to their families and communities in New Zealand and the Pacific, socio-economic factors still hinder many from achieving their set goals. This article begins by relating the author's own narrative as a Sāmoan living in the Pacific diaspora and working in tertiary education in Auckland. It then outlines the diverse aspirations of Pacific peoples living in New Zealand, with a focus on the educational hopes of recent migrants as well as New Zealand-born members of Pacific communities. These aspirations are presented with reference to the existing literature on Pacific success within tertiary education in Aotearoa New Zealand. We discuss how education providers support Pacific students, and the ways in which institutions are working to improve Pacific educational outcomes. It is argued that even if the New Zealand Tertiary Education Strategy (TES), the Action Plan for Pacific Education 2020- 2030 (APPE), and Unitec's Pacific Success Strategy 2019- 2022 are aligned in their goals, more effort is needed to ensure that these initiatives are implemented effectively through multi-disciplinary and value-based approaches. This article adds value by providing an insider's perspective of migration and a first-hand account of the challenges facing students in higher education in Aotearoa New Zealand. Moreover, the analysis contributes to the repertoire of academic studies and publications that help to understand and improve the Pacific experience in tertiary education in Aotearoa New Zealand.

## Introduction

While acknowledging that Pacific peoples have historical ties with Aotearoa New Zealand that predate western colonization, this article focuses on Pacific peoples in New Zealand in the context of a more recent history dating back to the 1950s and 1960s. At that time, an economic boom in New Zealand led to the recruitment of low-skilled Pacific Islanders from Fiji, Tonga, and Sāmoa, which formed the beginning of the thriving Pacific communities visible today. Pacific peoples in Aotearoa New Zealand reflect the diversity of the wider Pacific. They are part of a complex world that calls for an in-depth exploration. Research into this broader context is essential to understanding and improving Pacific success in tertiary education. The perspective presented here are part of that body of research and reflect the author's experience within the Pacific diaspora living in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Accordingly, the article begins by briefly recounting the author's experience of migration to Aotearoa New Zealand. It is a narrative that may resonate with the stories of many others living in the Pacific diaspora. It is an important story to tell because it has informed the author's professional role in contributing to Pacific success at Unitec, a tertiary education provider based in Auckland. By telling this story, the author aims to provide a personal introduction to the many challenges faced by migrants to this country and provide insight into her own position within the diaspora.

Having done so, the article will define and position Pacific peoples within the New Zealand context with specific references to migration, diversity, and education. It will then discuss the participation of

Pacific peoples in tertiary education and explore various factors that impact Pacific success. The author discusses how education providers support Pacific students, and the ways in which the New Zealand government and other educational institutions are working to improve Pacific outcomes. The author suggests that although the New Zealand Tertiary Education Strategy (TES), the Action Plan for Pacific Education 2020- 2030 (APPE), and Unitec's Pacific Success Strategy 2019- 2022 are aligned in their goals, more effort is needed to ensure that these initiatives are implemented effectively. It is further argued that Pacific success can be enhanced through the adoption of multi-disciplinary and value-based approaches in higher education in Aotearoa New Zealand.

## *My Story*

In early 2009, my husband, our oldest three children and I embarked on our dream journey to New Zealand, a place that we hoped would bring our goals and aspirations to reality. We CHOSE to move to New Zealand after considering many things, as do other migrants. While the migration journey is never an easy feat, it is sometimes undervalued by those in the receiving countries, New Zealand in our case. Also, there is a common assumption that peoples' choice to migrate was always forced because they struggled to make in to their home countries. However, this is not necessarily true. All migrants in New Zealand have come for various personal reasons and thus have different narratives behind their migration. For this reason, people should never make generalisations or assume that migration is the same for everyone.

Upon arrival, our sense of loss was tremendous, and emotions associated with leaving loved ones and our home were overwhelming. However, we were comforted because my parents and four of my five siblings were already residing in New Zealand at that time. Unlike many other Pacific migrants, we had a place that we temporarily called home while we started to look for employment and a home for just us. I would be lying if I said that our NZ dream was fast becoming a reality because it has not been the case. My husband and I assumed that we would be snatched up quickly because we had tertiary qualifications, good careers, and good references. Unfortunately, twenty-plus unsuccessful applications and six months of being unemployed brought feelings of defeat that made me feel as though we had made a mistake. We were not entitled to any government welfare benefits because we were new migrants. For a range of reasons, I felt that New Zealand's social services were not very helpful in our situation. As a result, my husband was forced to take up a low-income job to ensure we could support our three growing children at the time. He worked at a scrap-metal factory in Mangere, which was a far cry from his Manager position with Sāmoa Shipping Services.

Our faith in God's love and provision sustained us through tough times, especially when we felt New Zealand had not given us a fair go. We persevered in sending applications for roles similar to what we had had in Samoa, but without any luck. It reached a point where I knew the outcome before I sent the application in; always with the same response, "no relevant NZ experience", and "the calibre of applicants was greater" than what I had to offer. Hence, every time I received a response, it chipped away at my confidence.

In September 2009, our situation changed. I was called to attend the first of three interviews for a job supporting Pacific adult learners at a private training establishment (PTE) with a reputation as a Pacific education provider. We were ecstatic about the possibilities that lay ahead with this opportunity. I got the job! Interestingly, my three-plus years with the PTE was mixed with good and bad experiences. Although working with Pacific peoples was good, I found the PTE's processes and system challenging to deal with. I started to dislike the nature of the work as it went against my principles. My role was to see peoples' potential and help them realise it. The process and systems seemed to work according to a different set of priorities.

In 2013 I resigned and was blessed to find work as a Pacific Academic Development Lecturer (PADL) at Unitec. This new role restored my faith in systems and processes. As a PADL, I am now part of the Pacific Centre team tasked to provide academic and pastoral support to Pacific learners based at the Waitakere Campus. I quickly started to form relationships with my colleagues and Pacific students. My experience as an adult student and migrant living in the Pacific diaspora enabled me to recognize and understand the stories of struggle and resilience that students shared with me. Their experiences were similar to mine and I could understand where they were coming from. Hence my passion for the role.

I have always been an advocate for fair and just access to resources for the marginalized, and Pacific learners are clearly marginalized. But I also came to realise through my discussions with them that unless the current systems and processes are changed for Pacific by Pacific, successes will continue to be a challenge.

## Pacific Peoples in Aotearoa New Zealand

For many Pacific migrants, New Zealand offered opportunities that were not always readily found in the Pacific Islands. The lucrative offer of paid labour saw an influx of Pacific migrants working and settling in New Zealand (Bedford & Hugo, 2012; Sauni, 2011). By 1971, New Zealand's Pacific-born residents increased to just under 31,000 (Bedford & Hugo, 2012). The patterns of chain migration characterised how Pacific peoples migration to NZ, especially from the 1950s to the 1980s. Chain migration describes how a family would send one person to settle and find employment, send remittances and save for the next family member to join them. For many, the process continued until entire families were reunited. Pacific migrants chose New Zealand as a destination for multiple reasons, although one of the key reasons was education. Also, though physical distance separated the migrants from their homelands, their sense of cultural identity remained strong. Another factor was the strong spiritual practices of many Pacific migrants. Faith-based organisations ensured they remained connected with others from similar backgrounds. Chain migration strengthened family ties and increased the importance of the church in Pacific communities.

According to Fasavalu and Thornton (2019), the term 'Pacific peoples' refers to a concept that broadly describes those who identify with Pacific Island cultures. Previously, Pacific peoples were known as 'Pacific Islanders'. This term dated from a time when those in New Zealand were migrants who were predominantly born in the Pacific islands. In the New Zealand context, references to Pacific peoples are synonymous with the term 'Pasifika' which is a construct of convenience for government policy-makers that appeals to the sense of unity among Pacific peoples in the New Zealand context (McKenzie, 2018). However, this term is not accepted by many and is seen as problematic because it does not correspond to a word in any Pacific language, even though it is similar to the Samoan word *Pasefika*. Te Kete Ipurangi [TKI] (n.d.) explains that Pasifika is a collective term that refers to peoples from Sāmoa, Tonga, Niue, Cook Islands, Tokelau, Tuvalu, Fiji, and Kiribati who live in New Zealand. Despite the concerns, the term Pasifika continues to be used in New Zealand to group peoples from the Pacific into one population. In this article, the term 'Pacific' will be used to refer to Pacific learners in New Zealand and Pacific nations, their cultures, and practices.

This note on terminology is important because government policy-makers often view Pacific peoples as a homogenous group, whereas Pacific peoples see themselves as part of interconnected but distinct communities and nations. References to Pacific peoples should be made to acknowledge this diversity. Pacific peoples refer to peoples from the multiple Pacific islands who are practitioners of one or more of the living

cultures that exist in New Zealand. Macpherson (2001, as cited in Lee, n.d.) explains that references to Pacific populations, which insinuate Pacific peoples are of a homogenous culture, are often misleading. This paper acknowledges that Pacific peoples are not a homogenous group, despite shared similarities in social-cultural, economic, and political characteristics. These commonalities do not overshadow the unique nuances of the individual Pacific islands themselves. In other words, Pacific peoples comprise those who identify with one or more Pacific cultures. It also references those Pacific peoples living in NZ who belong to either Island-born or New Zealand-born groups (Anae et al., 2001). As mentioned above, peoples born in the islands migrated for various reasons and have considered New Zealand to be their home away from home. From the 1950s to the 1980s, they accounted for the majority of all Pacific peoples living in New Zealand. However, New Zealand's Pacific population has changed since then and is now comprised of a majority of more than 60% NZ-born Pacific peoples (Ministry of Pacific Peoples, n.d.).

In the past the use of the term Pasifika covered over the diversity of Pacific peoples. In more recent times however, the complex nature of the Pacific and its peoples, including their unique cultural heritages have been recognized and acknowledged as a permanent part of the New Zealand tapestry. New Zealand's recent (and current) governments have led social, cultural, economic, and political reforms that acknowledge and recognize Pacific peoples as "a significant, vibrant and diverse part of New Zealand society" (Pasefika Proud, 2020, p.8). This recognition is a positive step and allows for government agencies to capitalize on the shared values common to Pacific peoples: The values of love, family, collective, respect, spirituality, reciprocity (Pasefika Proud, 2020), and humility. Accordingly, government agencies have recently developed and implemented strategies that acknowledge the differences Pacific peoples represent, so it is increasingly possible to take advantage of shared values, principles, and practices (Pasefika Proud, 2020). These key Pacific values are reflected in multi-disciplinary approaches that ensure issues which impact Pacific peoples are addressed in culturally relevant and appropriate ways.

While much progress has been made since the 1950s in terms of recognition of Pacific diversity and access to different types of education and employment, there still needs to be a push for more participation. Pacific peoples are engaged at all levels of society, however, it may well be useful to develop Pacific ethnic-specific targets to ensure a thriving and diverse Pacific population. This type of issue, one that seeks to balance recognition of Pacific diversity and leveraging shared Pacific values and practices, is pertinent in the context of education in Aotearoa New Zealand.

### **Pacific Peoples in Education**

New Zealand's Pacific population is predominantly youthful, with a medium age of 23.4 compared to 38.0 for the general population (Ministry of Pacific Peoples, 2020). For this reason, Pacific peoples must participate

at all levels of education for a thriving New Zealand. Pacific peoples' migration stories typically reflect the desire to have a good education and the dream of attaining higher qualifications. Pacific peoples share aspirations of higher education qualifications that will bring honour and prestige to their families, communities, and Pacific countries of origin (NZ Human Rights, 2020), better employment opportunities, and improved health outcomes (Marriot & Sim, 2015). Despite a growing population and aspirations for educational achievements, Pacific peoples lag behind other populations in education participation rates and achievement at all levels. Success in education for many living in New Zealand has not been easy. As one researcher notes: "The journey to becoming a 'successful' person (whatever that might mean) continues to be a struggle in a competitive, multicultural and capitalist society" (Sauni, 2011, p. 53). And while Pacific peoples' participation in tertiary education is increasing, significantly fewer people attain a bachelor's qualification when compared with Europeans (Ministry of Pacific Peoples, 2020). Specifically, only 7.1% of Pacific peoples have a bachelor's degree or higher compared to 18.6% of Europeans (Marriot & Sim, 2015).

There are multiple reasons why many Pacific peoples commence tertiary studies; one key one is honouring their migrant parents' dreams and family, which also brings benefits for families as collectives (Samu, 2010 as cited in Boon-Nanai et al., 2017). Despite aspirations to acquire higher qualifications, compelling circumstances often impact their ability to do so. According to Mila-Schaaf et al. (2008, as cited in Bentley-Gray, 2021), Pacific learners' inability to access resources results from considerable economic disadvantages. Lee (n.d.) explains that financial pressures also result from Pacific peoples' involvement in cultural activities that need many to provide resources that enable the exchange of gifts at weddings and funerals.

In addition, despite the reasons for taking up tertiary studies, many Pacific learners encounter challenges that affect success and continuation. Toumu'a and Laban (2014, as cited in Bentley-Gray, 2021) describe it as a 'double-edge sword'. On the one side, acquiring a higher qualification will bring benefits, but on the other, family responsibilities make it unlikely for the person to continue, if support is not offered. Benseman et al. (2006, as cited in Boon-Nanai et al., 2017) reported that family pressure was among one of the factors that hindered non-traditional students' studies. For example, some learners are expected to care for younger siblings and other family members, as well as being responsible for the studies and work of others. Ultimately, juggling multiple responsibilities with studies becomes so difficult that giving up their studies becomes the best solution. Significantly, however, many Pacific learners who do manage to overcome the challenges while undertaking tertiary studies find that their perseverance pays off for them and their whole families; their success is not theirs alone but their families' as well (Samu, 2010 as cited in Boon-Nanai et al., 2017). Clearly, then, to overcome this difficult situation, Pacific peoples must have equitable access to resources and education where

their identities as Pacific peoples are embraced, and where their specific cultural context is recognized.

## Education Strategies and Action Plans

The Tertiary Education Strategy (TES) ensures that all tertiary education organizations (TEOs) take responsibility for offering higher education to all, including Pacific peoples, who aspire to enter and be successful in their education experience. The TES establishes the “long-term strategic direction for tertiary education” (Tertiary Education Commission [TEC], 2020, para. 1). Accordingly, TEOs must demonstrate commitment to eight priorities in their respective investment plans (Tertiary Education Commission, 2020). The eight priorities include:

...the achievement and wellbeing of all learners, ensuring that places of learning are safe and inclusive and free from racism, discrimination, and bullying; reducing barriers to success and strengthening the quality of teaching to give learners the skills they need to succeed in education, work and life taking account of learners' needs, identities, languages and cultures in their planning and practice... (Tertiary Education Commission, 2020, para. 3)

If the TES priorities are followed, Pacific peoples should be able to access tertiary education and be more likely to achieve because they would be safe in their learning environment without being concerned about discrimination and bullying due to their cultural identities. Consequently, Pacific peoples' participation and completion rates could be expected to go up. Further, as Pacific remains one of four Priority Groups across multiple sectors, including tertiary education, TEOs are expected to commit resources to them and must demonstrate how they meet the needs of its respective Priority Group learners.

In addition, the Action Plan for Pacific Education 2020-2030 is a 10-year plan to ensure Pacific peoples “feel safe, valued and equipped to achieve their education aspirations.” (Ministry of Education, 2021, para. 3). The plan has five key areas in which it hopes to increase Pacific peoples' success rates at all levels of education in NZ. These include the following aims (Ministry of Education, 2021, para. 5):

- work reciprocally with diverse Pacific communities to respond to unmet needs, with an initial focus on needs arising from the COVID-19 pandemic;
- confront systemic racism and discrimination in education;
- enable every teacher, leader and educational professional to take coordinated action to become culturally competent with diverse Pacific learners;
- partner with families to design education opportunities together with teachers, leaders and educational professionals so aspirations for learning and employment can be met;
- grow, retain and value highly competent teachers, leaders and educational professionals with diverse Pacific whakapapa.

The government and its agencies have endorsed (and are committed to) implementing the Action Plan for Pacific

Education 2020-2030. Importantly, it includes resources that will lead to positive educational outcomes for Pacific peoples (NZ Human Rights, 2020).

## Unitec

Formerly known as Unitec Institute of Technology, Unitec New Zealand Limited, is one of the country's 16 institutes of technology and polytechnics (ITPs). ITPs have provided vocational and technical skills training on a competitive model under which the number of courses increased. However, these courses were found to be of limited employability value and student enrolments began to fall. In 2018 it was reported that the viability of ITPs was in doubt: Radio New Zealand News reported that “the government warned that institutes of technology and polytechnics were struggling and began work on a new structure to make the sector less vulnerable to swings in student enrolments” (RNZ, 2018).

The current Labour-led government aimed to create one national ITP, of which the previous 16 ITPs would become subsidiaries. Through the Reforms of Vocational Education (RoVE) initiative, they aimed to centralise and coordinate vocational education so that it would become more meaningful for learners, employers, and communities (Tertiary Education Commission, 2021). The national ITP, Te Pūkenga - New Zealand Institute of Skills and Technology (NZIST), is planned to be fully rolled out in 2023 and should implement the priorities identified in the Tertiary Education Strategy and the Action Plan for Pacific Education 2020-2030.

The bail-out and restructuring of vocational training and skills education have been significant. It is now more critical than ever Pacific peoples are included in all discussions to ensure their interests and needs are reflected. In this new framework, Unitec aims to maintain what it currently provides well and improve other ways to ensure Pacific interests are prioritised.

## Te Noho Kotahitanga (TNK)

Embracing Māori values is a key to this new strategy. Unitec's foundational document, Te Noho Kotahitanga (TNK), is premised on core Maori values which hold that all peoples, including Pacific peoples, are acknowledged through Rangatiratanga (Authority and Responsibility), Wakaritenga (Legitimacy), Kaitiakitanga (Guardianship), Mahi Kotahitanga (Co-operation) and Nākau Māhaki (Respect) (Unitec, 2020). TNK demonstrates Unitec's commitment to Te Tiriti o Waitangi in which it acknowledges Māori as tangata whenua. Students are “invited to embrace these principles because there is evidence it will add value to the career path...chosen” (Keelan, n.d. as cited in Unitec, 2020, para. 15). In line with these values, all learners, including Pacific learners, at Unitec are welcomed to the Unitec community through a traditional Māori ritual, a pōwhiri which signifies members' commitment to each other (Unitec, 2020). The adoption of these values as guiding principles and practices should support Pacific learners in their studies and help to make their experiences at Unitec more meaningful. Also, the values-based system embraces multi-disciplinary

approaches to ensure Pacific learners are supported to achieve set goals.

Unitec's Pacific Success Strategy 2019- 2022 aligns with the Tertiary Education Strategy (2020) and the five goals of the Action Plan for Pacific Education 2020-2030. This alignment ensures its commitment to Pacific learners at the Institute. Unitec's Pacific Centre plays the role of modifying, advocating, and championing the four goals of the Pacific Success Strategy 2019-2022. The goals provide a clear direction in ensuring all staff contribute to Pacific success. The goals stipulated in the Pacific Success Strategy 2019- 2022 (Unitec, 2021, para. 15)

Are the following:

- 1) Increase Pacific student success, completion, and participation rates.
- 2) Grow Unitec staff capability and capacity to empower and support Pacific students
- 3) Grow Pacific knowledge and awareness in Learning, Teaching and Research.
- 4) Develop and maintain partnerships with Pacific communities and stakeholders.

The Pacific Success Strategy (2019- 2022) goals are actioned under the Pacific Success Strategy Operational Plan (2019- 2022). This strategy aims to address the concerns raised earlier in this article around ensuring accountability, providing culturally appropriate support, and ensuring the diversity of the Pacific is respected and acknowledged. With these challenges in focus, the Pacific Centre acts in good faith with the various parts of the institution to make sure all staff are responsible for Pacific success. In partnership with Pacific and non-Pacific staff, the Pacific Centre works with specific groups to ensure multi-disciplinary approaches provide Pacific learners with optimum opportunities to succeed. To ensure effectiveness, the Pacific Centre Director, alongside the Deputy Chief Executive (DCE) Pasifika and others, reports to the institution's Pacific council, Fono Faufautua whose members hold Unitec accountable for progressing Pacific learners' goals and aspirations (Unitec, 2021). Additionally, the Pacific Centre comprises staff from diverse Pacific ethnic groups who contribute to the overarching goal of Pacific success at Unitec by incorporating ethnic-specific and pan-Pacific approaches that best support Pacific learners. Therefore, at Unitec, Pacific learners are valued as are other learners, and the Pacific Centre actively engages to ensure the best possible options are provided to improve Pacific success and retention.

## Conclusion

Pacific peoples in Aotearoa New Zealand reflect the diversity of the Pacific, whether they be migrants or NZ-born. The richness and depth of experiences that Pacific peoples have provides insights as seen and experienced by Pacific peoples themselves. The reasons for migration and their presence in this country are different and need to be acknowledged and respected; all allude to making a change and chasing opportunities, including

acquiring higher education qualifications. The Pacific diaspora communities in New Zealand have historically experienced challenges that undermined and displaced peoples and cultures, which was symbolised by the catch-all term 'Pasifika'. Still, resilience and perseverance have been shown to change the path of Pacific peoples today and the ones they will traverse in the future. The government-led strategies and action plans illustrate this new situation which is being implemented throughout the country. Pacific migrants and their children should all have equal access to resources that enable every person to succeed; the policies and systems that are being created to improve people's livelihoods should value the differences as much as the similarities. However, although efforts and resources have been invested in closing the gap, much more needs to be done to ensure a more equitable and responsive New Zealand for Pacific peoples. The transformation in the ITP sector is currently being worked out; thus, it provides a prime opportunity for Pacific peoples to negotiate and implement what is being learned, and how that learning should be done to ensure wider and more meaningful engagement. It is hoped that this will ultimately lead to more success for all Pacific learners.

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#### Keywords

Pacific, Education, Unitec, Action Plan for Pacific Education 2020- 2030, Tertiary education Strategy, Māori Values