



Queensland University of Technology
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Fa'avale, Andrew, O'Brien, Gabrielle, Green, Alison, & [McLaughlin, Juliana M.](#)

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“May the coconut tree bear much fruit” – QUT’s ‘niu’ framework for outreach and retention with Maori and Pasifika students

Andrew Fa’avale, Gabrielle O’Brien, Dr Alison Green, Dr Julie McLaughlin
Queensland University of Technology

Abstract

This paper discusses an emerging initiative to support Maori and Pacific Island students’ outreach, retention and success at QUT. Drawing from experiences from a two-year engagement project with schools and the Maori and Pacific Island community in Brisbane’s northern corridor as well as a recent literature review, a number of common factors emerged as enablers and constrainers for Pasifika student success. These included personal agency, cultural capital, peer groups, systemic barriers, acculturation, deficit-theorising and intergenerational change. The ‘QUT Niu¹ Framework’ accounts for these factors for supporting Maori and Pacific Island student success. It is based on the Samoan adage ‘ia fua tele le niu’ or may the coconut tree bear much fruit. The framework provides for a coordinated whole-of-university and whole-of-community approach to supporting this cohort. We conclude by drawing implications for how universities can use cultural knowledge systems to support students’ academic identities, performance and success.

Context

Maori and Pacific Island (Pasifika) people have had long-standing links with Australia as neighbouring island states within Oceania. Changes to Australia’s migration policies in the 1960s led to a marked increase in Pasifika migration into Australia (Ravulo, 2015). In recent times, a large proportion of the Pasifika migration arrived via New Zealand (Perkins, Ware, Lemalu, Scanlan-Savelio & Schubert, 2015). Motivation for migration amongst Pasifika migrants varies, however, two of the basic drivers for migrating include educational and employment opportunities (Horton, 2014). The majority have settled on the east coast of Australia, with the highest proportion living in Queensland.

Ethnic-specific data in Australia beyond citizenship is difficult to obtain, and as such the origins of Pasifika migrants may be obscured (Rose, Quanchi & Moore, 2009). It is widely believed that official statistics vastly under-represent exact number of migrants with a Pasifika background (Cuthill & Scull, 2011). Further, there is an absence of dependable sources of information that captures those who voluntarily identify from Pasifika origin. Unreliable data sources have consequently made it difficult to monitor the needs of these peoples (Kearney, Fletcher, & Dobrenov-Major, 2011).

A scan of the existing research highlights issues and challenges relating to Pasifika peoples’ integration into Australian society. Employment trends indicate that a large proportion of

¹ Niu is the Samoan translation for coconut and/or coconut tree

Pasifika workers are engaged in unskilled and low-income occupations (Ravulo, 2015). Pasifika youth are at risk of experiencing mental illness at a higher rate than the general Australian population (Krause et al, 2014). In Queensland, 30% of all young people detained in the Queensland youth justice system were of Pasifika background as of 2012 (Rooney, 2012). This over-representation also exists in New South Wales (Ravulo, 2015).

Of particular relevance to this paper is the poor educational outcomes and attainment among Pasifika students in Australian schools (Chenoweth, 2014), and under-representation of Pasifika students in tertiary education (Kearney, 2012). A significant contributor to this has been Australian Government policy that has placed limitations on access to student loans for New Zealand citizens (Fa'avale, 2015). These statistics indicate that the main drivers for migration are not being achieved. Further, a review of the literature concerning Pasifika communities also reveals a paucity of Australian-based research with this cohort (Sheridan, 2015).

This paper discusses the development and impact of the QUT *Niu* Framework which seeks to support Pasifika students to thrive and succeed at university.

Background

Since 2012, QUT staff members and students have trialled small-scale activities and programs to address the emerging issue of access, participation and for Pasifika students. For example, in 2013 QUT Equity Services has implemented a Pasifika community engagement partnership project with 6 high schools in Brisbane's northern corridor aimed at widening participation and shaping aspirations towards tertiary education. In the same year, the intersecting of some of the varied initiatives led to key staff members forming the QUT Maori and Pasifika Working Party, including staff from the Learning and Teaching Unit, Equity Services, Student Services and Academic Language and Learning Services. At the same time a small group of Pasifika students formed the QUT Pasifika Association (QUTPA) to provide peer support to Maori and Pasifika current and prospective students. The QUTPA experienced exponential growth, attracting a membership of 100 students within its first semester; some of these members went on to achieve award-winning recognition from the university, among their colleagues and respective community. In 2015, QUT enrolment data showed that 561 students identified as citizens of Pacific Islands or were of island heritage (Fa'avale, 2015).

The initiative: QUT Maori and Pasifika Strategy

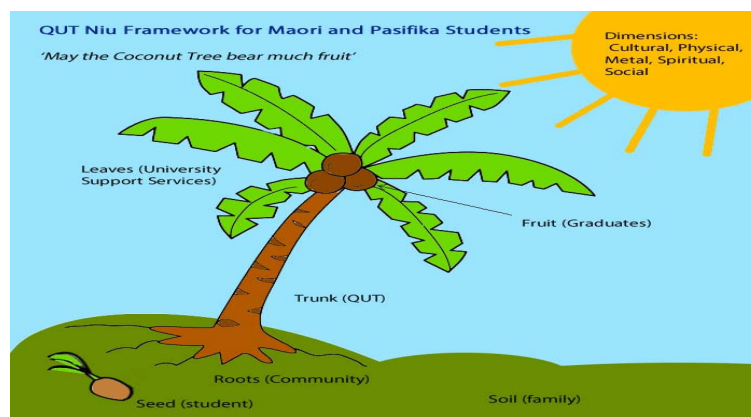
From these scattered seeds of interest, an organic growth of initiatives has developed slowly into a whole-of-university and whole-of-community approach to supporting Maori and Pasifika students in both outreach and retention. Funding through the Learning and Teaching Unit was invested into a research report to inform the QUT Maori and Pasifika Working Party Strategy. As a result of this report, and these university-wide developments, a conceptual framework was designed to provide a coordinated approach accounted for the bridges and barriers to Pasifika student success.

The development of a culturally-appropriate framework

The QUT *Niu* Framework was designed based on the socioecological model for human development and adopts the *niu* (coconut) tree as a metaphor for coordinating a whole-of-university and whole-of-community approach. Every element of the *niu* is used and valued in Pasifika culture and it is consequently labelled the ‘tree of life’. In this way, the choice of metaphor is fitting for the aspirations of the framework and its impact.

Just as the growth of a tree is an integrated phenomenon that depends on a proper balance and functioning of all parts, the success of a student is also reliant on proper balance and functioning of many factors. The factors included have been obtained from the existing literature; albeit mostly from the New Zealand context.

Figure 1: QUT Niu Framework: A Framework for Maori and Pasifika student outreach and retention



As is evident in the framework, each part of the tree corresponds to the various systems within the socio-ecology of a student.

Seed/Student

The starting point is the seed, which represents the need to understand their ways of being, thinking, knowing and epistemologies. To this end, cultural awareness training sessions across various programs within the university as well as external organisations have been carried out.

Soil/ Roots

The literature clearly highlights the importance of family and community integration into Pasifika students’ educational journey (Cuthill & Scull, 2011; Ng Shiu, 2011). Research suggests that partners in the education process (parents, children, schools, teachers, and communities) should be involved in the co-construction of shared knowledges (Gorinski & Fraser, 2006).

So far, QUT has developed strong relationships with 6 high schools where Pasifika students attend on-campus visits, access career development workshops and Pasifika student ambassador presentations, and an annual community cultural celebration to demystify university for themselves and their parents. Engagement and collaboration with churches, community organisations, sporting clubs, employment and education providers etc. is a continuing work-in-progress.

Trunk/University

The trunk in this framework is symbolic of the University. In particular and more importantly, it symbolises the lens through which QUT Maori and Pasifika communities and knowledges are viewed and engaged with. One of the main overarching objectives of this framework is that the basis of QUT's outreach and retention programs are couched from a paradigm of strengths rather than deficits. This has proven to be critical to the effectiveness and outcomes of each initiative (Sauni, 2014; Durie, 2006; Schreiner, 2012).

Branches/University Support Services

The branches bear leaves through which photosynthesis occurs. The benefits of photosynthesis are wide-ranging, for both the tree and the world around it. This represents the strategies and process that the university implement in order for the institution and wider society to thrive. If university support services sprout from an institution that adopts a strengths-based view of the target community, in collaboration with the community, they will maximise efficiency and effectiveness.

An example of an emerging initiative that fits this particular system is a partnership program between the QUTPA, Peer Program Strategy, Equity Services, QUT Library and the Pasifika community. This program is titled "Our Community Cares" and involves community members coming onto campus to provide academic and cultural support to students throughout semester. This culminates in a panel event involving Pasifika role models ranging from academics, QUT alumni and community leaders, through to industry professionals and sports stars.

Sun/ Culture (contextual dimensions)

The sun's ultraviolet rays are crucial for photosynthesis. Similarly, strategies must be meaningfully contextual to succeed. The sun and its ultraviolet rays in this framework represent the contextualisation of student learning and support services through the incorporation of all of the dimensions that are relevant to Maori and Pasifika worldviews. The *Fonofale (Samoan)*, *Te Whare Tapa Wha (Maori)* and *Fonua (Tongan)* models espouse that the physical, mental, spiritual, social dimensions and culture and family are crucial for Pasifika well-being and success. Equally, these dimensions should over-arch every Pasifika-focused initiative.

Niu/ Graduates

Every part of the coconut (the husk, shell, flesh and juice) are used in various ways in Pasifika cultures. Coconuts germinate from within and will only sprout when the conditions are right. This is a fitting analogy to sum why this framework was developed, and the importance of each of its systems. The *niu* (coconuts) produced are the graduates. They are the product of all of the above independent and complex factors being properly balanced and functioning. Eventually, they will drop, roll and re-grow. This is the hope of the Pasifika diaspora.

Summary and implications for practice

This framework illustrates an appropriate model to approach Maori and Pasifika outreach, student success and retention. It attempts to account for all of the most prevalent enablers and constraints to success for Pasifika students, as drawn from the literature and practitioner experiences. This framework has inspired a collaborative research project between QUT,

QUTPA and University of Otago (NZ), to learn more about Pasifika students' sense of identity as a student and how this may impact educational outcomes.

We conclude by posing the following question: Do students' cultural identities matter in their negotiations with university learning? How would a socio-cultural conceptual framework look like in your own context? How could a socio-cultural model of outreach, retention and success both involves and empowers community groups achieve their personal and professional aspirations?

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