

THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF PASIFIKA ANATOMY STUDENTS LIVING IN ŌTEPOTI AND STUDYING AT ŌTĀKOU WHAKAIHU WAKA

A talanoa

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Abstract

Many Pasifika students in Te Tari Kikokiko at Ōtākou Whakaihu Waka face challenges while living in Ōtepoti and studying in our department. We conducted online talanoa with 24 Pasifika undergraduate students to gain feedback about their experiences. Students reported having challenges in living independently, culture shock, and academic struggles while living in Ōtepoti. Reasons for choosing our institution and studying anatomy were discussed. Students reported challenges in adapting to learning styles for anatomy, workload content, personal barriers, lack of culturally competent support, difficulties in essay writing, and tutorials (timing conflict, delivery method). They also were reluctant to seek feedback from academics about their work. Students recommended extracurricular support (e.g., writing workshops), improving staff–student communication (e.g., for information on scholarship), and increasing Pacific presence (e.g., more Pasifika staff, visual signs). Institutions in Aotearoa New Zealand, including ours, should explore strategic ways to improve academic outcomes of Pasifika students.

Keywords

Pasifika students, talanoa, lived experience, academic support, social support

Introduction

In Aotearoa New Zealand, about 8% of the population are Pacific people and the population

is only expected to increase in the coming years (Stats NZ Tatauranga Aotearoa, 2024). The term “Pasifika” has been used to describe “peoples who

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have migrated from Pacific nations and territories. It also refers to the New Zealand-based (and born) population, who identify as Pasifika, via ancestry or descent” (Airini et al., 2010, p. 49). Given the increasing population of Pacific people, enrolment in universities in Aotearoa is expected to rise as well. However, Pasifika people in Aotearoa have always been underserved by the education systems (Boon-Nanai et al., 2017; McDonald & Lipine, 2012; Reynolds, 2016; Theodore, Taumoepeau, Kokaua, et al., 2018; Theodore, Taumoepeau, Tustin, et al., 2018), and universities need to improve Pasifika student support to promote Pasifika excellence.

Various factors may contribute to the disparity in academic outcomes for Pasifika students in Aotearoa. For example, universities in Aotearoa are built primarily on Western frameworks and often do not take into account Indigenous approaches in education. Western pedagogy tends to be more individualistic, whereas Pacific people value a holistic approach in education (Alkema, 2014; Chu et al., 2013). Consequently, Pasifika students may struggle in adapting to the Western approach in education. In addition, the number of Pasifika academics in universities is low (Naepi, 2019), proportionally much lower than in the general population. The low number also means that few staff are competent in Pacific cultures. Lack of cultural competency may be a barrier for Pasifika students to approach academics.

As ethnic minorities, Pasifika students may experience social anxiety when interacting with the ethnic majority (Fakapulua et al., 2023). Studies in other countries indicate that ethnic minority students may perceive discrimination (Nora & Cabrera, 1996), and their perception of the university environment (Wei et al., 2011) and anxiety symptoms (Manzo et al., 2022) mediate the association between minority stress and academic outcomes for higher education students. Additionally, many Pasifika students come from low-decile high schools (Sopoaga et al., 2013), and may not be as well equipped as students from higher decile schools. Furthermore, many ethnic minority students are first-generation tertiary students (Zalaquett, 1999), meaning they might not have somebody to guide them through the university system.

Te Tari Kikokiko at Ōtākou Whakaihu Waka is involved in anatomy education for healthcare professional programmes, undergraduate science courses, and postgraduate courses (University of Otago, 2025). While a majority of students in our department are New Zealand European

(NZE), there are also students of other ethnicities, including Māori and Pasifika. Since cadavers are used as learning tools for many courses, the department holds the whakawātea ceremony to provide spiritual safety for students (Māori and students of other ethnicities) and acknowledge the significance of the tūpāpaku in society (McClea & Stringer, 2010; Nicholson et al., 2011).

Among the undergraduate sciences courses, approximately 90–100 Pasifika students are studying at second- and third-year levels. Our team recently conducted a five-year review of 10 anatomy courses, and we found that for *all* courses, Pasifika students are more likely to achieve lower marks than NZE students (Time et al., 2023). A similar finding was reported in a study on first-year anatomy students at the Auckland University of Technology (Brown et al., 2018). These findings highlight the ethnic disparity in anatomical sciences education.

Cultural factors may influence anatomical learning. Some topics in anatomy may be tapu for Pasifika students (Madgwick et al., 2024). For example, Pasifika students may not be comfortable dissecting the head region because the head is considered a sacred body part. They may also feel uncomfortable viewing genitals in lectures or labs. Learning styles may differ between Pasifika and NZE students, as noted in a past study that found differences in learning strategies for anatomy topics in other cultures (Mitchell et al., 2009). Asking questions to academic staff may vary between cultures (Levinsohn, 2007). Pasifika students may be reluctant to seek help from academics (Chu et al., 2013), especially if there is a lack of student–lecturer relationship.

The aim of this study is to gather information on the experiences of living in Ōtepoti and studying at Te Tari Kikokiko that can help to further enhance Pasifika student support. We hope to use data from this research to improve the support infrastructure in our department. Other departments and institutions in Aotearoa may use data from this research to better support Pasifika students locally. They may also consider conducting talanoa sessions with their students to gain a better understanding of how they can support them.

Methods

Kakala methodology

In this study, we used the kakala methodology as previously described by Johansson-Fua (2023) and Thaman (1993). The kakala methodology refers to a research approach that resembles the

making of kakala. The kakala presents three main aspects/processes:

1. *Toli*—Toli refers to gathering fragrant flowers, and it symbolises the data collection phase in this study. In this stage we selected our target group: second- and third-year Pasifika anatomy students. It also reflects our process of developing the questions, obtaining ethical approval, and Māori consultation through the Ngāi Tahu Research Consultation Committee. This research was approved by the Human Ethics Committee (D21/245) from Ōtākou Whakaihu Waka. Additionally, we sought feedback from Pasifika students from the Biomedical Otago Pacific Students Association (BOPSA) to ensure that the questions were appropriate and relevant to Pasifika students. Participants were recruited and we assembled information through talanoa.
2. *Tui*—Tui is the process of making the garland. This phase represents the stage of data analysis. We conducted thematic analyses based on the responses gathered from the participants. Themes were identified, and the findings were summarised.
3. *Luva*—Luva means giving away the completed kakala to someone with sincerity and humility. Within the context of this research, this stage symbolises giving back to the people that we worked with throughout this research project (Vaiolleti, 2013). First, our participants received a koha of a \$40 gift voucher. More importantly, this stage also reflects how findings from this research will be used to inform our department about how to better support their Pasifika students and foster culturally appropriate spaces. A copy of the published article will be sent to the participants' university email addresses.

Talanoa method

To capture the students' lived experiences, data were obtained through talanoa sessions and thematically analysed. The talanoa sessions were recorded and held over Zoom. Initially, we planned to conduct the talanoa sessions in person; however, there was an outbreak of COVID-19 virus variant Omicron in our campus during the first few months of recruitment, which made us decide to conduct them online. For consistency purposes, we conducted the remaining sessions online.

Using the talanoa method developed by Vaiolleti (2013), we examined the nature and root causes of significant challenges faced by Pasifika

anatomy students, and evaluated the effectiveness of measures designed to support these students. The talanoa was conducted by the first author, who is a Tongan female student and approximately the same age as the participants.

Although participants were informed that the talanoa sessions might last between 30 and 45 minutes, we kept the time frame flexible to ensure that we stayed true to the meaning around talanoa and that the participants did not feel pressured by a time cap.

Recruitment

Pasifika students at both 200 and 300 levels in Anatomy were contacted via email inviting them for a talanoa session. In this study, we invited students who identified as at least one of the following "Pacific Peoples" categories in our institution database: Cook Island Māori, Fijian, Sāmoan, Niuean, Tongan, Tokelauan, or Other Pacific Peoples. Students who identified as Fijian and Indian were also invited, but we did not invite students who identified as Indian because the university system did not indicate whether they were from Fiji or elsewhere.

A majority of participants (15 out of 24) were also participants of a survey on Pasifika students experiences in 2021. At the end of that survey, they agreed to participate in a follow-up talanoa. An additional nine participants were recruited in 2022, and this was done by us contacting the Pasifika students in anatomy via email. Additionally, BOPSA helped advertise the talanoa to their members via their social media platforms. The only requirement for participants of this study was that they had taken at least one anatomy paper at either the 200 or the 300 level in the 2021 or 2022.

Demographic questions

Before the talanoa, participants completed a short demographic questionnaire online via the Research Electronic Data Capture database, hosted at the University of Otago. The demographic questions asked about year of birth, ethnicity, gender, levels of anatomy papers they had taken, place of birth, place where they grew up, and relationship status.

Questions for talanoa

The questions for the talanoa were constructed by our study team and related to Pasifika students' experience (see Appendix 1). The participants were asked to first introduce themselves, and then explain why they chose to study at the University of Otago and their reasons for choosing anatomy

papers. They were then asked to share any challenges in adapting to life in Ōtepoti. Students were also asked various questions on ways that the Department of Anatomy can better support them in terms of essay writing, receiving/seeking feedback on assignments, and how to foster a culturally responsive and appropriate learning space. Additionally, students were asked to share how the Pacific students' liaisons could further support them and how to involve more Pasifika students in research.

Data analyses

Demographic data were summarised using descriptive statistics. Thematic analysis was done using the framework outlined by Braun and Clarke

(2006). Responses from each question were coded at the semantic level and themes were identified by the first author. The reporting was centred on the experiences as described by the participants. Direct quotes were transcribed verbatim and used to support relevant themes and responses that did not correspond to a theme not covered in this study.

Results

Demographics

In total, 24 Pasifika students who had taken at least one anatomy paper completed our talanoa sessions. The majority of participants were female (70.8%) and from Aotearoa but outside of Ōtepoti (83.3%), and all had completed 200-level anatomy papers (see Table 1). On average, they were 22 ± 2.1 years

Table 1. Demographic data of participants in this study.

Variables	N	%	M	SD	Range
Age	24		22.5	2.1	19 – 26
Ethnicities					
Pacific peoples, not further defined	2	8.3			
Samoan	7	29.1			
Cook Islands Māori	4	16.6			
Tongan	8	33.0			
Niuean	2	8.3			
Tokelauan	1	4.1			
Fijian	6	25.0			
Solomon Islander	0	0			
Māori	2	8.3			
New Zealander European	6	25.0			
Asian	2	8.3			
Other ethnicity	0	0			
Gender					
Male	6	25.0			
Female	17	70.8			
Akaʻvaine	1	4.2			
Anatomy papers taken					
200-level papers	24	100			
300-level papers	12	50			
Place of birth					
Dunedin	1	4.1			
New Zealand, other than Dunedin	21	87.5			
Pacific Island	2	8.3			
Other	0	0			
Place grow up					
Dunedin	1	4.1			
New Zealand, other than Dunedin	20	83.3			
Pacific Island	2	8.3			
Other	1	4.1			
In a relationship					
Yes	10	41.6			
No	14	58.3			

old. Overall, the top three ethnic groups in this research study were Tongan (33%), Samoan (29.1%), and Fijian (25%). Six out of 24 (25%) of the participants identified as male (25%) and one identified as akava'ine (4.2%). Their reasons for choosing to study at the University of Otago are included in the supplementary data.

Challenges in adjusting to life in Ōtepoti

Three main themes were identified when participants were asked about their challenges in adjusting to life in Ōtepoti: struggles with self-managing, culture shock, and academic adaptations.

Theme 1: Struggles with self-management. Participants faced challenges with having relocated far from home and self-management:

Definitely trying to adapt to this place as an independent person has been hard, like in terms of, you know, reaching out, getting support and also just keeping on top of things because there's not anyone in my ear ringing every day telling me what to do. (Participant 15)

Starting uni itself is such a major life change but when you add to that moving and living away from family for the first time, living with other young people for the first time, it can be quite overwhelming... I did struggle without my family. I'm really close to my family. I struggled without their [family] support and just how much I had to self-manage, just with the high work demand and nobody really keeping tabs on you. (Participant 2)

Theme 2: Culture shock. This theme emphasises the participants' experience of culture shock after arriving in Ōtepoti, where there are not many Pasifika people and no significant Pacific cultures:

I feel like in your first year, just moving down. Like a really big jump from Auckland, from a really populated Pacific community to the bare minimum. (Participant 9)

Coming into like the drinking culture was a shock and I tried to fit in a bit, and I missed the reason why I was there in the first place. (Participant 22)

Theme 3: Academic challenges. This theme represents the struggle participants had with adapting to the academic workload and new learning style. Many participants felt that secondary schooling did not prop them up well for tertiary level. For example:

First, was coming from NCEA [National Certificate of Educational Achievement] to university, NCEA did not prepare me in any way, shape or form. (Participant 3)

I definitely think the biggest challenge with moving was mainly the different style of study that you kind of had to adapt with university. (Participant 5)

Reasons why students chose to take anatomy papers

Three key themes were identified when participants were asked why they chose anatomy papers: they were interested in the papers, they either enjoyed or achieved better grades in their Health Sciences First Year programme, which provides some introduction to anatomy topics, and they wanted to use it as a pathway or it was a prerequisite for their course of choice.

Theme 1: Interest

I just found it really interesting. (Participant 1)

I found it quite interesting, relating it back to my actual body and stuff. (Participant 18)

Theme 2: Human Body Systems (HUBS) paper

I was most comfortable doing HUBS191 and 192. Those two papers were also the best. (Participant 6)

I did better on my HUBS papers so then I thought it'll make sense to do anatomy just because that seems like something, I'm all good at. (Participant 10)

Theme 3: Pathway

My goal of this whole BSci journey was to get myself prepared for when I do get into medicine, that everything in med just goes nicely. (Participant 14)

Anatomy 241 is a prerequisite for Pathology 201, and I wanted to do Pathology 301. (Participant 20)

Challenges that students found in studying papers in anatomy

Two themes were identified when participants were asked to share the challenges that they found in studying anatomy papers: learning adaptations and lack of culturally competent support.

Theme 1: Learning adaptations. This theme represents the challenges participants found in the learning style as well as the workload in the anatomy papers that they took. For example:

Those two papers . . . contain extremely tapu/sacred, forbidden topics that we have to talk about openly and that's something that my Pacific self, who was raised in a Christian church, just really struggled with and still struggles with today. (Participant 6)

Probably the fact that they're very content heavy. A lot of the time you don't have time to really be behind on your studies because it's just back-to-back-to-back. Those are the challenges I've been having lately. (Participant 22)

Theme 4: Lack of culturally competent level of support. This theme pertains to participants' struggle with the lack of support and culturally competent approaches that comes with doing anatomy. For example:

The anatomy degree is not catered to Māori and Pacific at all. Just the structure of it, the way things are run, it's like we don't even exist, or we're not considered in the planning of the curriculum . . . Just the cultural incompetency shown . . . Two of the papers I wasn't able to attend the labs in person because of the passing of my friend and they were like "oh, can you provide a death notice or a letter from the family" to like prove that. (Participant 7)

I know it's for Pacific students, but it's like the type of support is the same to everyone else, like "oh, just email us". (Participant 10)

How the Department of Anatomy can better support Pasifika students in their study

Three main themes were identified when participants were asked to share how the Department of Anatomy can better support them in their studies. Themes included extracurricular support; staff approaches to teaching, students and their learning; and Pasifika representation.

Theme 1: Extracurricular support. This theme refers to participants who identified a need for extracurricular support outside of labs and lectures. They mostly wanted to achieve one-on-one sessions to gain better understanding of the topics or having that constant support in the form of tutorials. For example:

Have these one-on-one sessions . . . that way we're confident enough to ask questions in front of people we know and we're able to orientate and ask, and we have a much better idea. (Participant 3)

I guess providing extra support during labs or maybe having like extra classes where they discuss the lab materials. (Participant 24)

Theme 2: Staff approaches. This theme represents issues raised by participants with the way that teaching and learning were conveyed, and key areas that they would like to see more support in. For instance:

[Participant's reference to working with cadavers and human materials considered tapu] What they could do, whether it's a talanoa or kind of prepare us for that a bit more, just acknowledging that it's a very different thing to grasp as Pacific people. (Participant 4)

Have staff that actually care about us and don't just want the title, I don't know how they could ever get the results that they want for us, if they don't care in the first place. (Participant 7)

Theme 3: Pasifika representation. This theme refers to the desire of participants to see more Pasifika representation in the Department of Anatomy, such as having Pasifika lecturers:

How having staff that are actually Pasifika would be a big difference. (Participant 10)

Another thing that would help would be having Pasifika lecturers, that would be nice. (Participant 3)

Additional information on how Pasifika student liaisons in the department can provide better support, and participants' opinions about essay writing, feedback about approaching academics for help and research engagement are included in supplementary data.

Factors that would help Pasifika students attend the tutorials

Two main themes were identified when participants were asked to share ways to increase Pasifika student engagement or attendance at the tutorials provided by the University's Pacific Islands Centre. These themes were identified as: teaching delivery and timing convenience.

Theme 1: Teaching delivery. This theme is about the way the content was delivered as well as the desire to have options open for participants to join not only in person, but also online via Zoom:

I wonder if the online delivery options would be helpful or even doing both of them at the same time. So, we have an in-person venue, but you also stream

it on Zoom so that students who aren't able to make it to the location at that time can still benefit from that learning. (Participant 2)

I guess one way to improve and to help increase the numbers is having a structure. Some tutors have structures of how they tutor, but some don't. They just come and they're like "ok, what do you want to do today?" You can throw people off because they're like "oh why wouldn't you have something ready for us?...Put up worksheets", I guess the first week so that people know, this is what they're going to talk about. (Participant 24)

Theme 2: Timing convenience. This theme refers to the issue around the timing of the tutorials:

Time. I think one of the tutorials are at five o'clock or something. Maybe if it happened a bit earlier in the day, that would be better. (Participant 3)

A lot of why I couldn't attend tutorials came down to just logistical timetable issues where I couldn't get there in time or I was too far away or had something soon after. (Participant 2)

How the Department of Anatomy can be more welcoming to Pasifika students

Four main themes were identified when respondents were asked about ways that the Department of Anatomy could be more welcoming to Pasifika students: a welcome fono, Pacific visuals, Pacific representation, and culturally competent workshops.

Theme 1: Welcome fono. This theme is about hosting a welcome fono for the Pasifika students in the department that would aid in relationship building and familiarity:

I think the fono idea's really nice, holding that space for us as students to kind of having that one-on-one interaction with them and talanoa with them. (Participant 4)

A welcome fono is incredibly important for Pacific students at the start of the year, I think that should be for both undergrad and postgrad students. (Participant 6)

Theme 2: Pacific visuals. This theme pertains to having Pacific arts and visuals (e.g., signs) around the department, fostering a sense of belonging and inclusivity for Pasifika students:

It's always nice to go in and to see our patterns or our materials in a space like the Department of

Anatomy, it's just a way of them acknowledging our presence and I guess significance in the department. (Participant 4)

Pacific art, that'd be beautiful. (Participant 12)

Theme 3: Pacific representation. This theme is about increasing more Pasifika faces in the department:

I think that more Pacific representation is really important. (Participant 2)

Probably like a Pasifika face in the department. (Participant 9)

Theme 4: Having culturally competent workshops. This theme refers to suggestions by participants that academics should attend cultural competency workshops:

Maybe it would be nice to start doing some cultural competency workshops where staff gets to learn about students and students get to learn about staff. (Participant 21)

I think it's really important to network at the start of a like of a degree or of a year. It feels a bit of like a safer environment to acknowledge the different cultures of students that come to study here Otago and the anatomy department. (Participant 23)

Discussion

In this study, we gathered information on the experiences of Pasifika students living in Ōtepoti and studying at Te Tari Kikokiko. Participants shared information about the difficulties they faced adjusting to life in Ōtepoti, reasons they chose to study anatomy courses at Ōtākou Whakaihu Waka, and the difficulties they encountered while studying anatomy. Additionally, students shared ways that the department could better support Pasifika students academically, factors that they perceived would increase tutorial attendance, ways in which Pasifika students' liaisons could better support them, and how the department could encourage more Pasifika researchers.

Why anatomy?

After completing the Health Sciences First Year programme, the reasons they elected anatomy papers included that they enjoyed studying the topics, achieved good marks in their first-year papers that had anatomy components, or the academic pathways (e.g., medicine, or a

prerequisite for other programs) they planned to pursue require anatomy knowledge.

Challenges at institutional level

New learning environment. For high school graduates, the transition to university takes place in late adolescence and is typically intermingled with navigating a sense of personal, cultural, and spiritual identity as well as figuring out a career path (McKinley & Madjar, 2014). This transition can be more challenging when students move to a new location where they are an ethnic minority. Participants reported experiencing a few challenges with adjusting to life in Ōtepoti. First, they may have faced culture shock because the majority grew up in neighbourhoods that had a higher proportion of Pacific and Māori people. Pasifika students from other studies have also noted how it is already daunting enough to be in a university setting as a Pasifika, but to walk into a lecture theatre or laboratory and realise “that you are the only brown person there” can be quite intimidating (McKegg, 2005). Often, academic staff may not realise the difficulty for Pasifika students entering a tertiary education setting as an ethnic minority (McKinley & Madjar, 2014). Thus, connecting them to a Pasifika community as early as possible is critical for their academic journey.

Academic adjustment. Undoubtedly, learning and assessment types change from secondary to tertiary education. Though Pasifika students enter university feeling eager to learn, they may not be well prepared for aspects of learning at tertiary level (McKinley & Madjar, 2014), such as the heavy workload. The secondary schooling system fails to adequately set up their Pasifika students for higher education (Leenen-Young, 2020; Sopoaga et al., 2013). Overall, Pasifika students are disproportionately represented in low-decile schools (Education Counts, 2023) and may not have had access to the same educational opportunities as other student groups (Alkema, 2014). Therefore, universities should collaborate more closely with secondary schools as a strategy to ensure that students are well equipped for the tertiary level (Theodore, Taumoepeau, Kokaua, et al., 2018).

The majority of students regarded the anatomy papers as particularly content heavy and requiring rote learning rather than comprehension. Of more concern were papers that involve working with tūpāpaku in the laboratories or discussing reproductive biology. Often, participants responded

with hesitation or uncertainty because these can be considered tapu. In Pasifika culture, the tūpāpaku (especially the head region) and topics around sex are considered extremely tapu (Bender & Beller, 2003). How to approach tapu topics is important to take into account because Pasifika people are motivated and guided by these values, which may affect how they view these topics (Young et al., 2022). One student noted that carrying out a whakawātea ceremony (Martyn et al., 2013) can help to mitigate disconnections and experiences for Pasifika and Māori students.

Lack of Pasifika support. The lack of culturally appropriate support in the department was another challenge participants found. Students noted that the support was not Pasifika focused; they did not have a chance to build a vā with their lecturers. These findings are similar to those of Fletcher et al. (2011), in that students found that their teachers were not supportive because of a lack of cultural empathy. Strengthening the lecturer–student relationship is crucial and involves lecturers demonstrating respect for what their Pasifika students contribute to the learning space as well as showing care for them socially and academically (Fletcher et al., 2011; Hawk et al., 2002). Thus, the university needs to be more aware of cultural sensitivities when dealing with issues related to underrepresented groups.

Challenges at individual level

Pasifika people often value a collective perspective of the world, but when residing in an individualistic society and institution, such principles can become compromised (Ioane, 2017). Time management (e.g., managing bills, living and studying) was an obvious challenge for some participants. Students struggled with knowing how to study and managing their time. Furthermore, some participants reported difficulties transitioning from their parents’ stricter household to attending university in Ōtepoti, where there was much more freedom.

Recommendations on how to better support Pasifika students

Using information from this talanoa, we provide suggestions on how Te Tari Kikokiko could better support their Pasifika students. Being aware of the difficulties faced by Pasifika students alone is insufficient; action, beginning at the institutional level, is required moving forward.

Culturally responsive teaching. Pasifika students

may approach learning differently when concepts are not taught through their own cultural and experiential perspectives (Gay, 2002), which highlights the importance of culturally responsive teaching. Participants noted that one way to increase Pasifika student engagement is by applying the lecture content (wherever lecturers can do so) to the realities of Pasifika people. Implementing a programme such as the Pacific Immersion Programme—which enables medical students to learn about health within their own social and cultural contexts—is one example of effectively implementing culturally responsive teaching (Sopoaga et al., 2017). Doing so enables Pasifika learners to draw on their realities and find some common ground.

Relationship building. Many participants felt a gap between themselves and their university lecturers because they perceived them to be superior figures in the department. Pasifika students are taught from a really young age to respect those in positions of authority (Ministry for Pacific Peoples, 2022). Thus, such a relationship gap in the university setting may become a barrier to their learning. This leads into why few participants in this study reached out for feedback from their lecturers. Institutions should prioritise building horizontal rather than hierarchal relationships that will empower students (Freire, 2020).

Pasifika students tend to link their academic success to the quality of their relationships with their lecturers or tutors (Chu et al., 2013). Students noted that even minor efforts, such as remembering their names, using a Pacific greeting at the beginning of a lecture, incorporating Pasifika values and perspectives into teaching, are conducive to their overall success. Participants believed that lecturers who exhibited these attributes tended not to come across as being judgemental or to make students feel like they were wasting their time. Unfortunately, there were a few participants in this study that had negative interactions with academic staff, which led them to stop seeking for help from them. This emphasises the importance of providing a welcoming environment for Pasifika students.

While institutions need to be responsive to Pasifika students' needs, participants also play a key role in their academic success; that is, they still need to put in the effort of being proactive in their learning. This can entail reviewing course content, creating a supportive peer group, making use of extracurricular resources the university offers, and setting short- and long-term goals.

Pasifika representation in the Department of Anatomy. Having Pasifika representation encourages a sense of belonging and inclusivity. When students were asked about this, many noted that having more Pasifika staff in the department is important because they would be more relatable and understanding of Pasifika values and worldviews. Currently, the number of Pasifika academics across Aotearoa universities remains extremely low (Naepi, 2019); in our department there is only one Pasifika academic, who is from Fiji. This highlights the urgent need for institutions in Aotearoa to recruit more Pacific academics.

Often, citing the lack of Pasifika people who have doctorates is a typical response to this issue. However, Naepi (2019) identified areas within the Aotearoa university system in which many opportunities to employ Pasifika academics are being missed and advocated for a system-wide approach that places the responsibility on institutions to promote Pasifika success within academia. Having more Pacific academics may help bridge the gap and enhance the quality of lecturer–Pasifika student relationships.

Extracurricular support. Findings from our study indicated that many participants struggle with essay writing, the main issue being structure. For this reason, the department should implement essay-writing workshops designed to help students develop the skills that they need to effectively structure essays appropriately.

In terms of tutorial attendees, many participants found that the tutorial times (early evening) were not convenient. Thus, evening tutorials should consider providing kai for students who turn up. Since this talanoa was done, tutorial times have been changed to early afternoon to promote student attendance. Developing thought-provoking and interactive learning may potentially help increase student attendance as well. Tutors could, for example, hand out worksheets for students to complete before the tutorials to identify areas where the students may require more support as well as give students an idea of what that tutorial will be about. Overall, fostering culturally safe spaces and tutorials that do not replicate another lecture format is a step in the right direction.

Transitional support. There are disparities in academic outcomes in anatomy education between NZE and Pasifika students (Time et al., 2023). Consequently, these outcomes limit Pasifika students from entering into healthcare professional programs or pursuing postgraduate studies.

One respondent highlighted that “it’s the idea of being able to help insulate Pacific students a lot better as they transition into 200-level anatomy study. And from there to then insulate them once again as they travel into 300-level study.” Those transition periods are potentially a crucial target for education intervention or initiatives because the learning strategies and assessment types are not the same in all levels.

Interactivity. Te Tari Kikokiko can be more welcoming to Pasifika students in several ways. For example, a welcome fono for Pasifika students should be implemented annually as a way to start building those relationships early. Giving staff and students the opportunity to be in the same space and interact over food creates the ideal conditions for establishing such bonds early on. Additionally, including Pacific art around the department could physically promote inclusivity and Pacific cultures. Moreover, the Pacific student liaisons should raise greater awareness about who they are and how they can serve our Pasifika students.

Limitations

There are a few limitations to our research study. Only 24 students took part in this study, and it may not be completely representative of the large cohort of Pasifika students in the Te Tari Kikokiko each year. Thus, there may be themes that were not captured in this research. Furthermore, the term “Pasifika” is an umbrella term and does not reflect the diversity of Pacific cultures (Airini et al., 2010). Another potential limitation is the uneven numbers between males and females; that is, more female students in this study than males. Thus, there may be themes from male students that we did not capture. Our previous study found that male students experience a higher degree of stress related to academic expectation than female students (Fakapulua et al., 2023). Lastly, our talanoa sessions were held online rather than in person. Being face to face is essential in Pasifika culture and talanoa sessions are typically held in such manner. Thus, the difference in methods may have led to participants responding differently than if they were held in person.

Conclusion

Though mitigating academic outcomes for Pasifika students remains a challenge, it is still an issue that can be resolved by using holistic, inclusive educational strategies that are Pasifika specific (Alkema, 2014). This implies that Pasifika values, culture, perspectives, and encounters are incorporated

into educational processes at the institutional, programme, classroom, and learner levels. Pasifika students have long been underserved in the academic space, and it is time to place the onus on institutions to implement changes that promote Pasifika success.

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Supplementary data are available upon request from the corresponding author.

Glossary

akava'ine	transgender people of Cook Islands Māori descent
fono	meeting, gathering
kai	food
kakala	garlands made of Tongan fragrant plants
koha	gift, token
luva	gift
Ōtākou Whakaihu Waka	The University of Otago
Ōtepoti	Dunedin
talanoa	a Pacific concept that refers to open and respectful dialogue or conversation
tapu	sacred, forbidden, taboo
Te Tari Kikokiko	The Department of Anatomy
tūpāpaku	cadaver
vā	connection
whakawātea	clearing of the way

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