

Supporting Pasifika Learners in New Zealand Tertiary Education: Strengths-Based Pastoral Care Practices to Enhance Pasifika Learner Wellbeing and Educational Outcomes

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Abstract

Pastoral support influences learner wellbeing but inconsistent support, limited transparency and confidentiality concerns can reduce its effectiveness. This study investigates effective pastoral care strategies for Pasifika learners, focusing on identifying core pastoral practices and understanding their relationship to learner wellbeing for enhancing educational outcomes. An online survey of Pasifika tertiary students received 20 responses from students enrolled in both part-time and full-time study in the areas of early childhood teaching and tertiary teaching. The research team used a pragmatic methodology combining Pasifika and Western perspectives, starting with a literature review and beginning talanoa (conversations) through an online survey. The findings reveal that effective pastoral care for Pasifika learners is fundamentally relational, holistic, and culturally grounded. Learners identified regular check-ins, academic guidance, and emotional support as the most valued forms of assistance. Feeling understood as Pasifika learners emerged as a central theme, with an emphasis on the importance of cultural recognition, respectful relationships, in environments free from discrimination. Pastoral support strongly influenced wellbeing, particularly emotional stability, motivation and mental health. Learners described how culturally safe pastoral practices foster a sense of belonging, strengthen inner mana (empowerment), and create confidence to engage in learning. The research demonstrates a clear connection between culturally responsive pastoral practices and improved wellbeing outcomes for Pasifika learners. It underscores the value of teachers' cultural capability, authentic relationship-building, and dedicated Pasifika support roles. The findings support the development of pastoral models that honour Pasifika values, identity, and community, contributing to enhanced learner wellbeing and educational outcomes.

Keywords: pastoral care, Pasifika learner, tertiary education, higher education, culturally responsive practice

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Introduction

Pasifika learners in New Zealand's tertiary education sector face unique challenges that require culturally responsive pastoral care approaches. This study explores effective pastoral care strategies for Pasifika adult learners, synthesising research on culturally grounded support systems, relational pedagogies, and holistic wellbeing frameworks that enhance educational success for Pasifika learners. This research therefore examines strength-based approaches that honour Pacific cultural epistemologies while supporting learner wellbeing and achievement.

This project is a response to key findings from the Student Journey Playbook (Manukau Institute of Technology, 2021) which investigated the student journey at Manukau Institute of Technology. At the time, findings of the Student Journey Playbook identified Pasifika learners as one of the highest groups to withdraw from their enrolled program during their studies. The Student Journey Playbook found that Pasifika learners' experience impacted factors such as their attendance due to insufficient support from family and lecturers, inconsistent timetables, financial constraints and other commitments such as work demands. This research focuses on addressing these conflicting challenges and finding solutions to facilitate effective pastoral care for Pacific learners to complete their studies.

The project aims to identify:

- effective pastoral strategies from the Pacific learners' perspectives;
- Pacific centered approaches to meet the needs of Pacific learners while also seeking to improve their learning experience;
- strategies that will contribute to reducing student attrition rates and improve Pasifika education outcomes.

The project is divided into different stages:

- Stage 1: Define pastoral care
- Stage 2: Identifying best practices
- Stage 3: Identifying core components in pastoral care that practitioners should incorporate
- Stage 4: Exploring the correlation between pastoral care and health and wellbeing.
- Stage 5: Developing a set of guidelines highlighting effective pastoral strategies for Pacific learners

This report will be discussing key findings from stages 3 and 4 of the project by exploring the core components of effective pastoral care for Pasifika learners and examines the relationship between pastoral support, wellbeing, and learner success. During stage 3 and stage 4 of the project, data were gathered through surveys and qualitative feedback from Pasifika learners to identify commonly used pastoral practices and to explore how these practices influence health and wellbeing outcomes.

Literature Review

The literature indicates educational systems need to be responsive to the multiple worlds of minority students, and increasingly policies and strategies in New Zealand have been adopted to promote the development of Pasifika learners. In the tertiary setting, improvements have occurred, although more is needed (McDonald & Lipine, 2012). The Education (Pastoral Care of Tertiary and International Learners) Code of Practice 2021 recognises the challenges

our student population can face and is in place to support the wellbeing and safety of learners studying with a New Zealand education provider (Sillifant, 2024). This regulatory framework has prompted institutions to examine how pastoral care can be delivered in culturally appropriate ways. In line with the Code of Practice, tertiary providers across New Zealand are looking at ways to support the mental health and wellbeing of adult learners, with recommendations focusing on taking a holistic approach to support both domestic and international students.

Pacific values are holistic both in understanding and action, and consider not only the physical but the emotional, mental, and spiritual aspects (Bentley-Gray, 2023). Pastoral care strategies must therefore address multiple dimensions of learner wellbeing rather than focusing narrowly on academic progress. Pastoral support was reported to strongly influence wellbeing, particularly emotional stability, motivation, and mental health. Learners described how culturally safe pastoral practices foster a sense of belonging, strengthen inner mana (empowerment), and create confidence to engage in learning.

Methods

Talanoa, the Pacific practice of purposeful conversation, has emerged as a vital methodology for engaging Pasifika learners. The practice of Talanoa as a concept and a research tool in promoting Pacific knowledge systems and practices in tertiary education in Aotearoa New Zealand. The significance of recognising and acknowledging Pacific oral traditions will add value to and enhance Pacific ways of knowing and engagement in any context including that of Pacific learners in NZ tertiary settings.

Talanoa enhances meaningful engagement with learners as it provides a sound pedagogical tool in which to align conversations and draw responses that show what is significant in pastoral care for the Pacific learner. Talanoa methodology acknowledges the oral traditions of the Pacific voice which includes that of Pacific learners in the tertiary environment.

Talanoa is a widely used research methodology, often referenced to the initial and subsequent research work of Vaioloti (2006, 2016). Additionally, concepts of talanoa have been developed in Pacific research that highlight the types of engagement within the talanoa process such as malie (energy/uplifting) and mafana (warmth) (Manu'atu, 2000, as cited in Fa'avae et al., 2016). With the rise of technology, there is growing evidence to suggest that talanoa which is traditionally face to face, can be experienced in the virtual online space (Fairburn-Dunlop, 2014, as cited in Gremillion et al., 2021). This research has captured the use of talanoa in such a way that participants were able to respond through an online survey link.

Demographic Information

- Age groups: 18 and above
- Area of study: tertiary teaching, early childhood teaching
- Level of study: diploma, degree—first year, second year, third year and above
- Pacific ethnic groups: Samoan, Tongan, Fijian, Cook Islands, Niuean

For this study, an online survey was used as the primary data collection method. The survey was distributed to adult Pasifika learners studying in teaching and adult education programmes at one tertiary institute in New Zealand. In total, 20 participants completed the

survey, providing valuable insights for the research. The survey consisted of 12 questions aligned with the project's aims and objectives.

Results

Effective Support Strategies

Participants rated the following 5 factors. All of the factors listed in Table 1 were rated as either important or very important. Notably, building positive relationships with staff and receiving academic support were among the highest-rated areas. The least rated factor—where only 45% of learners considered staff involving their family/aiga as very important, 10% indicated that it was not important. Although involving family is typically viewed as a key aspect of Pasifika values and norms, these findings suggest that from the learners' perspective, this is not seen as an essential component of pastoral support.

Table 1

How Important Are the Following for You to Feel Supported?

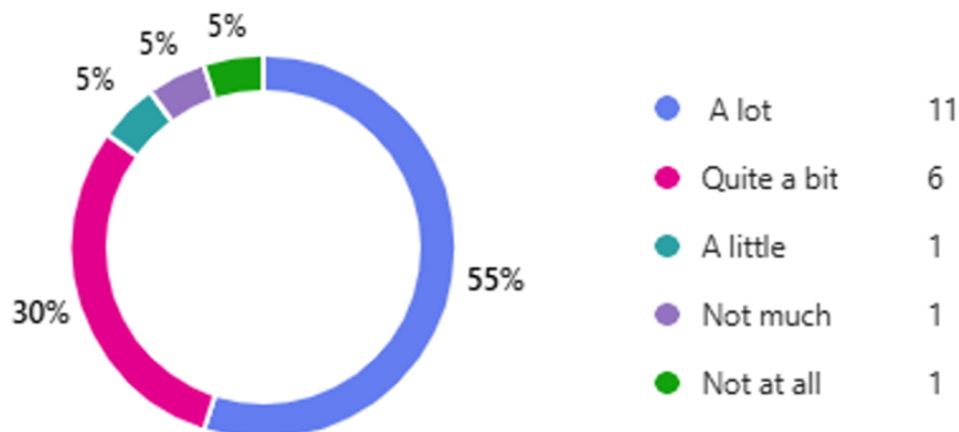
	Very important	Important	Somewhat important	Not important
Building a positive relationship with staff	90%	5%	5%	Nil
Staff understanding Pasifika culture	70%	25%	5%	Nil
Regular check-ins about wellbeing	55%	30%	15%	Nil
Staff involving your family/aiga when needed	45%	25%	20%	10%
Getting academic support	80%	20%	Nil	Nil

Pastoral Support Affects Wellbeing

The findings indicate that pastoral support plays a significant role in students' overall wellbeing. Many respondents (55%) reported that pastoral support affects their wellbeing “a lot,” while a further 30% indicated it impacts them “quite a bit.” This means that 85% of learners recognise pastoral support as having a strong positive influence on their wellbeing. However, 15% of respondents felt that pastoral support does not significantly affect their overall wellbeing. This suggests that while pastoral care is highly valued by most students, its impact may vary depending on individual circumstances, personal resilience, or the level of support experienced. Overall, the results highlight that pastoral support is a critical factor in supporting Pasifika learners' wellbeing, reinforcing the importance of consistent, meaningful, and culturally responsive support systems within the learning environment.

Figure 1

How Much Do You Think Pastoral Support Affects Your Overall Wellbeing?

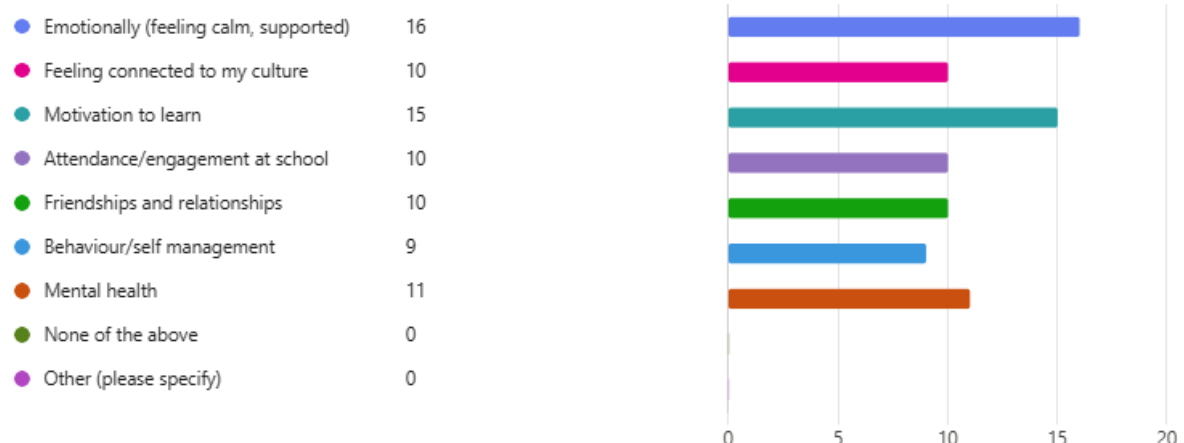


Pastoral Support and Academic Engagement

When asked which areas of wellbeing have improved because of pastoral support, the top 3 responses show that pastoral support has contributed most strongly to improvements in students' emotional wellbeing, motivation, and mental health. Students reported feeling an increased sense of calmness, support and reassurance, highlighting the importance of emotional care within pastoral systems. In addition, pastoral support has helped to strengthen students' motivation to learn, suggesting that when learners feel supported, they are more engaged and willing to succeed in their studies. Improvements in mental health were also identified, reinforcing the role of pastoral care in supporting students' overall wellbeing. The findings demonstrate that pastoral support plays a crucial role in fostering both wellbeing and academic engagement for Pasifika learners.

Figure 2

Which Areas of Your Wellbeing Have Improved Because of Pastoral Support?



What Makes Pasifika Learners Feel Supported

Themes arising from the question “What makes you feel most supported as a Pasifika learner?” are:

A Sense of Belonging is Essential

Feeling accepted, included, and free from discrimination helps students feel safe and confident in their learning environment.

Relationships With Lecturers are Key

Support comes from lecturers who build genuine relationships, understand students, and check in on their wellbeing.

Teachers Need to be Approachable and Supportive Academically

Students value being able to ask questions, receive clear guidance, and get help when needed.

Pasifika Values Strengthen Learning

Family, community, cultural identity, and shared values play a big role in helping students succeed.

Institutional Support Also Helps

Structured support like orientation and student services contributes, but is less impactful than relationships and culture.

Discussion

Overall, the responses highlight that effective pastoral support for Pasifika learners is relational, culturally grounded, and holistic in nature. Students value support that recognises and affirms their cultural identity, as this strengthens their sense of belonging and ensures cultural safety. When cultural understanding is present, support feels meaningful; when it is absent, it can become a barrier.

A strong and consistent theme is the importance of relationships and connection. Learners feel most supported when teachers take time to build trust, listen genuinely, and engage with them beyond surface-level interactions. This relational approach aligns with Pasifika values of connection, community, and shared understanding.

Students also emphasise the need for holistic support, including emotional, social, spiritual, and mental wellbeing. Pastoral care is not seen as separate from academic success; rather, it is interconnected with students’ overall wellbeing and ability to succeed. However, there are gaps in accessibility and consistency. While support is appreciated, it is not always regularly experienced, suggesting inequities in how pastoral care is delivered. In addition, trust and confidentiality are critical as without these, students may feel unsafe or reluctant to engage.

Another key insight is that effective pastoral care must include practical guidance and academic support, not just emotional encouragement. Students value clear communication, direction, and actionable advice alongside relational care. Additionally, pastoral support plays an important role in empowering students, helping them build confidence, strengthen their identity (mana), and contribute positively to their learning communities.

Conclusion

The research demonstrates a clear connection between culturally responsive pastoral practices and improved wellbeing outcomes for Pasifika learners. Findings indicate that relational and culturally affirming pastoral strategies are central to enhancing Pasifika learner wellbeing and educational outcomes. Key forms of support identified included regular check-ins, academic assistance, and wellbeing support. Although majority of participants reported feeling well supported, learners consistently emphasised the importance of staff building genuine relationships, showing care through correct pronunciation of names, recognising specific island heritage, and demonstrating acceptance and respect for Pasifika identity.

Cultural safety, trust, and consistent communication were identified as critical enablers of effective pastoral care, while lack of confidentiality or limited follow-up reduced the perceived usefulness of pastoral support. Importantly, learners reported that pastoral support significantly affected their overall wellbeing, particularly in emotional wellbeing, motivation to learn, and mental health.

These findings support the development of pastoral models that honour Pasifika values, identity, and community, contributing to enhanced educational experiences and learner success. The findings suggest a strong correlation between pastoral care practices grounded in cultural responsiveness and improved wellbeing for Pasifika learners. This study highlights the need for institutional approaches that prioritise relational pedagogy, Pasifika-informed strengths-based pastoral care practices and regular proactive engagement from institute staff to enhance Pasifika Learner wellbeing and educational outcomes.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that Grammarly and Copilot, AI-assisted writing software's, was used in proofreading and refining the language used in the manuscript. The usage was limited to correcting grammatical and spelling errors and rephrasing statements for accuracy and clarity. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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