

# Co-opting a shared approach with Pacific communities via an internship initiative and a sporting organization

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This article explores the perspectives of participants from a partnership established between Western Sydney University (WSU) and the National Rugby League (NRL), a large and multifaceted international sporting organization. Ten students from WSU's Pasifika Achievement to Higher Education (PATHE) initiative took part in an internship program with the NRL. This program sought to bolster Pacific cultural awareness, and consider how PATHE interns developed learning outcomes and experiences whilst interacting and encouraging positive relationships between the NRL and its community groups. Four NRL staff members who acted as the intern's supervisors also took part in this partnership. The implications of this research are three-fold – strong partnerships between universities and industry partners are vital for effective work-integrated learning; the development and upholding of Indigenous and Pacific platforms and spaces are important to increase cultural awareness; and to foster such developments, universities and industry partners need to demonstrate clear leadership.

Keywords: Internships, diverse communities, engagement, higher education, Pasifika

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Partnerships between institutions of higher learning and professional organizations frequently result in mutual benefits for both parties. Tertiary education providers promote the organizations that afford their students job-ready training and transition programs, whilst the reputation of these organizations is bolstered as a result of their collaboration with universities. These partnerships often manifest in university students engaging with the community groups that organizations partner with, and these students bring unique skill sets to the table that enhance such relationships. This practical application of academic learning in the workplace is commonly known as 'work-integrated learning'. The effectiveness and benefits of work-integrated learning for students and organizations is well documented amongst the literature (see Jackson, 2013; PhillipsKPA, 2014).

This article explores the perspectives of participants from a partnership that was established between Western Sydney University (WSU) and the National Rugby League (NRL), a large and multifaceted international sporting organization based in Australia. The research project aimed to understand the benefits of, and create opportunities for, Pacific students from WSU who were engaged with a paid internship at the NRL, and their experience of bolstering Pacific awareness within the organization, particularly in professional roles. Ten students from WSU's Pasifika Achievement to Higher Education (PATHE) initiative, a specialized program assisting the retention, course progression, completion, and transition of Pacific students, took part in an internship program with the NRL. This program sought to bolster Pacific cultural awareness, and consider how PATHE interns developed learning opportunities and experiences whilst interacting and encouraging positive relationships between the NRL and its community groups. Four NRL staff member who acted as the intern's supervisors also took part in this partnership. These two groups participated in semi structured interviews providing insight into the experience of the students undertaking this unique opportunity, whilst also gaining further insight from the supervisors, and their understanding of the outcomes and benefits of supporting such a program and shared approach to cooperative education.

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The community groups working with the NRL consisted of community-based agencies, youth and health services, and local sporting clubs. These community groups are connected to the NRL and work alongside them. They include high schools and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) groups that strive to take part in the NRL within a culturally specific way such as forming cultural on-field teams that create social hubs for those from such backgrounds. WSU PATHE students and the four NRL supervisors were interviewed in September/November 2016, and their views are considered throughout. In keeping with a writing style and methodology that seeks to honor Pasifika ontological and epistemological realities, participants are quoted freely, to allow their voice to emerge, rather than only the perspective of the author.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *University and Community Relations*

Various metaphors have been used to understand and analyze the relationship between universities and communities, and the power of creating effective partnerships between them. Stewart and Alrutz (2012) use the analogy of this partnership as having “parallels...to...healthy romantic partnership” (p.44), where there is an understanding of “two individuals working to build and sustain a meaningful relationship” (p.45). Within such a partnership, both the university and the community group ought to aspire to having a “voice of one – one mission, one philosophy, one leader” (p.44). This can, however, be as challenging as attempting to have one ‘voice’ with one’s romantic partner, as these relationships make known the “give and take, ups and downs, the fits and starts” (ibid) that are essential in any successful relationship. Indeed, where these relationships are strong, the views of community groups “transform our practice in light of their input” (Sandy & Holland, 2006, p. 31).

One of the greatest hindrances to the development of effective relationships is “the ghettoization of disciplines...[which separates] the university from the communities in which they are located” (Stewart & Alrutz, 2012, p. 45). This view is often reciprocated by community groups, who “often see their local university as distinct from the rest of the community” (Jacoby, 2003, p.45). This perceived dissociation between universities and community groups results in a transaction-based approach to collaboration (Stewart & Alrutz, 2012; Worrall, 2007), which are “a series of one-way transfers of goods” (Stewart & Alrutz, 2012, p. 45). These can be problematic as while they meet immediate needs that are present for both the institution and the community group, after the transaction is complete, the relationship “breaks off” (Stewart & Alrutz, 2012, p. 45), resulting in an “engagement effort [that] is for show - perhaps only to meet mandated requirements or for public relations purposes” (Leiderman, Furco, Zapf, & Goss, 2003, p. 15). This is a contradiction from what ought to be the “civic role of higher education...[-] to play a role in developing a next generation of citizens who understand and can promote needed change” (Leiderman, Furco, Zapf, & Goss, 2003 p.10). Community groups also engage in these transactions with learning institutions to “generate new support and resources” (Geller, Zuckerman, & Seidel, 2016, p. 154) which assist in the aforementioned goals. Where institutions seek more meaningful engagement, Leiderman et al. (2003) argue that four components need to be engaged with - institutional infrastructure, including practices and services; academic culture; faculty knowledge and skills; and partner relationships (p.4).

Where such partnerships are healthy, universities are understood not to be “saviours of resource-, competence-, and knowledge-deficient communities” (Stewart & Alrutz, 2012, p. 47), but rather a collaboration and reciprocity partner (Worrall, 2007), where there is “frequent and candid communication between partners, [and universities] explicitly value the community partner’s expertise

and contributions, and build the community organization's capacity to function" (Worrall, 2007, p.6). Billett (2015) points out that such "partnerships are difficult to generate and sustain" due to the differences in goals and priorities, but these relationships are imperative "to support and acknowledge" for the vital contributions they can make to all stakeholders (p. 83).

#### *Community Partnerships and Student Effectiveness*

Edwards, Mooney, and Heald, (2001) argue that student contributions to community groups are generally undervalued, despite the fact that they "provide an infusion of volunteer labour . . . and enables the provision of services that might not otherwise be possible" (p.458), and that students ought to be used in more effective ways within such learning spaces. PhillipsKPA (2014) surveyed 4500 Australian organizations, and found a myriad of benefits and incentives for organizations to utilize work-integrated learning. Particularly pertinent was the ability for organizations to give back to the industry, which provides a twofold reward: to meet their corporate social responsibilities and to improve their public image. Moreover, Australian organizations stated they were able to have "access to new thinking and ideas", "refresh their organization", create a strong "integration with the university sector", and importantly, an opportunity "to recruit graduates in the future" (PhillipsKPA, 2014, p.41).

Students are more likely to engage and invest in their learning and the learning of others "when they perceive a real organizational benefit" (Geller et al., 2016, p.152). These effects are felt more prominently within "high-poverty urban contexts" (ibid), as students are able to "dispel deficit orientations that adults often hold towards low income and minority urban youth" (Geller et al., 2016, p.153). Engagement with groups from high-poverty urban contexts is considered "arguable more salient...due to its potential to re-frame the historical one-sidedness of school / community partnerships" (ibid). This is pertinent to the research as Pacific people in Australia constitute 1% of the population, however, are overrepresented in the youth justice system and have almost double the unemployment rate than non-Pacific people (Ravulo, 2015).

"Affective commitment" refers to emotional identification with and attachment to the organization - this in turn "predicts job performance" (Meyer, Paunonen, Gellatly, Goffin, & Jackson, 1989, p. 169). This notion is supported by Giles (2010) research, which aimed to address the few indigenous teachers and high staff turnover rates in remote schools (Giles, 2010). Giles (2010, p.57) noted that "... nearly every classroom has an indigenous teacher assistant". A program was then developed which utilized work-integrated learning to train and qualify the teacher assistants that allowed for greater sensitivity, culturally appropriate teaching, and affective commitment. In similar fashion, university students are able to add value to an organization (in this case, the NRL) to consider their community groups in a more sensitive fashion, to be discussed below.

Research findings by Jackson (2013) shows the key benefits that occur when students engage meaningfully with community groups. Involvement for students increases confidence and "...their ability to perform the different skills in the workplace" (Jackson, 2013, p. 112), which positively impacts skills transferability (ibid) and graduate employability (Jackson 2013; Henderson & Trede 2017). Community groups are also enriched as a result of participation, through staff and organizational development and students bringing "fresh ideas, knowledge, skills and approaches" (Henderson & Trede, 2017, p. 74). Moreover, as pointed out by Atkinson, Misko, and Stanwick (2015, p. 9), for employers it is a way "to access resources for getting jobs done". Social justice is promoted through motivating the common good and transformational learning. Such partnerships also encourage social

justice principles, and data produced by PhillipsKPA (2014, p. 41) shows that “giving back to the community and profession” is the primary driving force behind organizations creating such partnerships.

Research on work-integrated learning by Agnew, Pill, and Orrell (2017) and Fleming and Hickey (2013), point out that work-integrated learning in the sport sector must show the strength of a strong cooperative partnership between universities and sporting partnerships, whereby both partners are working towards a common goal. The research on sporting work-integrated learning is primarily based on students from sport and health courses (Agnew, Pill, & Orrell, 2017; Fleming & Hickey, 2013). The diversity of courses that the interns were from demonstrates the uniqueness of the PATHE@NRL program.

#### *National Rugby League and Community Engagement*

The NRL are renowned for maintaining strong links with community stakeholders and groups. On the 15<sup>th</sup> of August 2015, a recorded interview took place as a part of SVA Consulting Quarterly (Social Ventures Australia, 2015). When asked if community engagement strategies positively impact the bottom line, several points were raised. Community engagement, it was stated, is measured through the Social Return On Investment (SROI) model, which allowed the NRL to “understand what we could do better, and refine what we do with our program” (Social Ventures Australia, 2015). Another aspect this model allowed for was “an objective, quantifiable measure that we could [use to] say to our funders, and future funders, this is the difference we are making in our community” (Social Ventures Australia, 2015). There is an understanding of the need to address contemporary issues within this model, such as mental illness amongst players within the game, and the need for “direct connection with the playing group. Get that, and then you really start to get some volume and scale...take the time to consult and engage the staff to be part of that process...that alignment is critical” (Social Ventures Australia, 2015).

The NRL recognizes the importance of sport as a mechanism for “social engagement...and [can] break down barriers for individuals and communities” (Australian Rugby League Commission, 2012, p. 5), with the Australian Rugby League Commission (ARLC) being the arm that oversees and administers these programs (Australian Rugby League Commission, 2012, p. 6). There is also an understanding that “sport contributes to safer communities and tackling crime and offering alternative role models and peer groups” (Australian Rugby League Commission, 2012, p.6). In 2012 alone, \$1.5 million was invested into community programs that are run by the NRL to “respond directly to community need”, targeting indigenous Australians through the All Stars program. Many other community-based initiatives instigated and hosted by the NRL are listed throughout this ARLC report (pp.23-25). One of the most relevant programs run by the NRL that is commented on within this report is their *Learn Earn Legend! All Starts Youth Summit* in 2011, which targeted indigenous school students, and “saw 180...undertake education, employment and personal development workshops” (Australian Rugby League Commission, 2012, p. 5). Further, the NRL has formed a ‘school to work’ transition program, which, in 2012, saw 427 out of 626, or 68% of students’ transition to further education, training, or employment. These kinds of school-aged engagements are directly relevant to the work of the Pasifika Achievement to Higher Education (PATHE) initiative under Western Sydney University (WSU), and created a point of synergy with the PATHE@NRL interns, to which we now turn.

## RESEARCH CONTEXT

To promote an enhanced connection and relationship to the benefits of creating a closer working relationship with culturally and linguistically diverse communities (CALD) in the greater western Sydney region of NSW, the PATHE@NRL internship program was established in 2015. The program provided paid opportunities for undergraduate students from a Pacific background, whose family originally came from the South Pacific region, to engage with organizational and community experiences through the National Rugby League. With near to 50% of the professional rugby league players coming from a Pacific background themselves (Ravulo, 2014), the PATHE@NRL program promoted further scope to assist the NRL with gaining better insights into working with such a prevalent cohort in the game. Additionally, it also promoted active engagement with local Pacific community groups and schools across this specific region of Sydney; where the largest urbanized cohort of Pacific people reside (Ravulo, 2015).

The following research was undertaken to better understand the benefits of running this internship program, with the view to facilitate a cooperative learning approach between a university and its students. This is paired with a broader aim to understand the role of a larger sporting organization and its' players, and the growing Pacific population becoming more prevalent across higher education and sporting achievements in Australia.

The research consisted of four female and six male Pasifika students. The students were studying various undergraduate degrees, ranging from an array of courses in the School of Science and Health, School of Business, School of Social Sciences and Psychology and the School of Humanities and Communication Arts. The students were from a diverse mix of Pacific countries including Samoa, Tonga, Fiji, Cook Islands, along with Maori students. All students were aware they were represented as Pacific peoples – similar to the NRL, as they have also combined the Islands under the umbrella term 'Pacific'. Each student had a supervisor – there were four Pacific supervisors and six non-Pacific supervisors. The 10 students were employed by the NRL, dispersed amongst the eight clubs based within Greater Sydney and the NRL headquarters. The daily tasks given to interns were dependent upon their club or department. However, generally, interns who were at NRL clubs focused on welfare orientated work that was based around wellbeing and education. Whilst those at NRL headquarters and surrounding departments tended to focus on policy, research and governance development; including the promotion of community and corporate connections.

### *Methodology and Method*

In the spirit of collaborative and collective approaches, a mixed method approach to the research was undertaken. Students were asked to first undertake individual interviews after completing half of their 200 hours of paid internship with view to capture their experiences and perceived benefits of being involved in such a unique program. Secondly, a focus group was conducted with as many students present in the one location, providing scope to further discuss and highlight shared and collective perspectives. Thirdly, individual interviews with internship supervisors were undertaken at a separate time and location, promoting an honest and open conversation about the participation of the student in the program.

Such approaches reflect the notion of *talanoa*; as both an empirical research methodology, and a cultural practice undertaken across the Pacific (Vaiotei, 2006). As a research tool, it provides scope for participants to be seen as the genuine focal point of the conversation, and it promotes a co-opted approach the research. Too often indigenous communities feel they are overly researched *on* and *for*,

rather than *with*. The approach promotes an opportunity for participants to guide the interview and overall conversation, and to have their contribution honored through quotes that reflect the key themes also negotiated with participants (Vaioleti, 2006). As a cultural practice, talanoa shapes a greater consciousness on the way in which the individual is positioned and impacts on the greater group. In turn, this can also shape a shared understanding and appreciation for the relationship between each other and forge a shared vision in helping navigate issues and solutions. Therefore, the employment of such a methodology and respective methods was undertaken with participants to support their reflections, whilst also contributing to the learning associated with their internship experience.

#### *Talanoa in Data Analysis Methodology*

In keeping with the talanoa methodology, the focus group and interview perspectives sought to align with Pacific cultural practices of power sharing and the creation of the conditions to allow participants to speak openly and honestly, resisting “rigid, institutional, hegemonic control” (Vaioleti, 2006, p.24). Vaioleti describes the importance of “potentiality” in a talanoa approach, where knowledge creation emerges from “rich contextual and inter-related information to surface as co-constructed stories” (p.24), and participants are “uplift[ed in] the spirits” and share a “positive state of connectedness and enlightenment” (p.24). This occurrence was particularly evidenced by the focus group participants. There were several occasions where mutual experiences from one participant to another were discussed, which encouraged a critique and interconnectedness of shared experience that would have otherwise been lost. The NRL staff interviewees challenged cultural and power relationships as they saw present within the organization and offered critique of how the organization could improve. Methodologically, the views that were most resonant / most frequently discussed by all participants at the focus group were included; for NRL staff members, the perspectives that were most commonly shared across different staff members’ interviews are articulated below, emphasizing interconnectedness of these perspectives, and how they reveal new knowledge by individuals working in different spaces across the NRL.

Ethics approval was sought and granted from Western Sydney University Human Research Ethics Committee; approval number H11796. One main ethical consideration included ensuring students could participate in providing feedback on their experience without it impacting negatively on their previous, current, or ongoing involvement in the internship program. Such concerns were counteracted by making their participation in the research voluntary and optional, and assuring that such feedback, whether positive or negative was kept confidential and would not affect ongoing participation.

#### *Limitation to Study*

Not all students were able to be present for the focus group, however, we strove to ensure that at least half were in attendance. This meant that certain individuals’ perspectives were not shared as part of the collective voice being developed through this methodology. Nonetheless, all students were able to provide time to undertake an individual interview with the researchers. Some students were also near to completion of their internship, which provided them with a more informed view of their experience as opposed to those that were still trying to complete their hours.

## DATA ANALYSIS

### *Student Perspectives*

A total of six out of the ten PATHE@NRL interns took part in a focus group in September 2016, where they were asked to reflect on the following questions:

- 1) What have been the benefits of being a PATHE@NRL intern in your team?
- 2) Do you believe there's been an improvement of Pacific cultural awareness in the game as a result of being a Pacific intern?
- 3) What do you think the NRL has learned as a result of your participation?

Their responses are presented here chronologically, highlighting how they perceive NRL community engagement and their experiences of the program.

#### *What have been the benefits of being a PATHE@NRL intern?*

When reflecting on their individual experiences of being a part of the NRL, interns stated that their collective liminal experience fostered a sense of community amongst themselves, where “You *belong* there. We kinda became part of the furniture, so to say. So we just fit in” (Intern A). Initially, this sense of comfortability was not present, as interns reported feeling a sense of being “just an intern” (Intern A), and felt uncomfortable contributing to decision making processes. NRL colleagues / supervisors were, however, quick to encourage the interns to take part in these processes and have an active part within their departments. This process was accelerated through active involvement in important tasks, such as the development of the *Pacific Youth Summit Report*, which highlighted the happenings of a youth summit which encouraged Pacific youth to be more involved within the NRL.

Confidence was developed as a result of such tasks, even to the point where one intern stated they were “just critiquing little things” (Intern A).

Interns also reflected on the importance of their ability to bring “different perspectives” (Intern B) and to see through “cultural eyes” (Intern C) in these decision-making processes that greatly contributed to their engagement with and advocacy for community groups.

The development of creating such familiarity and comfortability between the interns and the NRL later proved invaluable, as interns were recognized to have the capacity to deliver workshops and engage with stakeholders and even government officials as a part of their work duties.

There was consensus by the students that this experience equipped interns to be able to develop “not so much like the job relevant things, but the life skills as well. Like how to communicate with each other” (Intern D). These skills are obviously vital within any workplace, but even more so in the NRL, where community engagement is such a key aspect of the work the organization does daily.

One of the strongest perspectives that interns brought to the NRL regarding community engagement was epistemological in nature, highlighting the importance of not simply taking a professional player out of their social context, but seeking the betterment of all involved in the lives of that single player:

Forty-three percent of Pacific Islanders, but that's just players. What about the families they come from? What about the communities that they come from? It's a bigger scale. And it's

intangible, the things that they're helping them become . . . what can we do for them? . . . What kind of program can we implement to kind of give back to these communities? (Intern A)

Interns reflected on the annual Pacific test, where teams from the Pacific region compete, and considered if such community events were sustainable and how they served to benefit the communities that take part long term. Rather than just having the one annual test, the students recommended that the NRL should "maybe [should do] more often throughout the season" (Intern B). One potential way of doing this would be to have a Pacific All-Stars team, and even nation-specific teams, that would recognize and contribute directly to the communities that 43% of elite players are drawn from. Another intern considered how they could make these communities, and not only the individual players, "feel involved in the game, cause they are a big part of the game" (Intern D). These concepts relate to the importance of *aiga* [family] and the interconnectedness that occur between individuals and the greater collective.

*Do you believe there's been an improvement of Pacific cultural awareness in game as a result of being a Pacific intern?*

The development of cultural awareness within the NRL directly correlates with their effectiveness within Pacific communities to address these communities' goals. The Pacific Youth Summit was highlighted as one of the most beneficial programs that interns took part in:

I think with the first Pacific Youth Summit . . . credits to the NRL, there's a lot of movement for empowering Pacific leaders, like youth leaders. And I think as young Pacific people, they're kind of like, "Wow. I can actually be a leader". And I think . . . the NRL has given them that opportunity to . . . strive in. (Intern A)

The high school students that took part in this youth summit were "able to speak openly" (Intern A), and the NRL's facilitation of this event led other staff members to ask, "How did they respond?" Interns then had the opportunity to highlight the processes that they undertook to encourage meaningful interaction with these young Pacific leaders, and why certain modes of engagement were entered into. This is a key aspect of cultural awareness informing community engagement – giving a space where Pacific youths are able to *talanoa* (share their perspectives in a non-pressured environment), which is a culturally appropriate means of engagement with Pacific community stakeholders, one that allowed for a successful program and execution.

Another intern mentioned the importance of being aware of "the stats for on-field representation compared to the management side" (Intern E), as this is not only "very different", but also forms:

a pathway for management to get in touch with the communities, and have that perspective, and understand the culture more. [This promotes] more understanding, [rather] than just being black and white about it. (Intern E)

Interns believed that a greater awareness of the high level of Pasifika players on the field ought to increase the amount of funding allocated to events such as the Pacific test, which in turn could be used to promote community agendas and concerns for those that come from those communities.

Although the Pacific test was acknowledged as a Pacific space within the NRL, strong concerns were shown towards how Pacific players and their communities are treated:



The way I see it, I just . . . I don't understand how we can be like, you're a good player, come, we'll just *take* you. Just take you away. But who cares about your community now. You know . . . (Intern B)

Further consideration was given around the potentially exploitative nature of engagement with Pacific players, as they are understood to be, according to Intern A, "the safe option" who won't "fight back" in the face of "[decisions] that have been made for [them]", even if they go against a player's better judgment. There is an understanding that is especially present within Pasifika cultures to submit to authority, which encourages deference even if it means personal suffering: "Oh well, I still want to play, so I'll just say yes . . . do whatever they say".

This act of compliance can often take place within organizational cultures that are not culturally aware of the nuances of Pasifika cultural identities – compliance is not always willful. Several means of addressing this reality were suggested, such as each club having a Pacific representative present for all club decisions, alongside increased education amongst players and staff. Such cultural realities need to be apprehended and respected if an organization intends to truly understand other peoples' cultures, which impacts upon whether they engage in respectful and innovative ways with their communities' stakeholders whom they seek to serve.

*What do you think the NRL has learned as a result of your participation?*

There was a clear understanding among the interns that their participation within this program encouraged a sense of value amongst different NRL departments. In the eyes of the interns, the acknowledgement of their presence within the organization created a deeper awareness of Pacific perspectives and therefore empowerment being present behind the scenes, which fostered a sense of cultural competence and familiarity when working with Pasifika community groups.

There was a keen awareness that the PATHE interns contributed towards breaking stereotypes within the organization, which encourages other Pacific people, including community stakeholders, to engage more readily with the NRL in a culturally appropriate way. One intern described this as a "new strand of reliance" (Intern C), wherein the NRL ought to be more dependent upon Pacific peoples to inform the ways the NRL engages with especially Pacific community stakeholders.

Overall, PATHE@NRL interns felt that their presence within the internship program heightened cultural awareness that, in turn, promoted more culturally appropriate means of engagement with community stakeholders. These interactions were not overtly different from the usual functioning of the NRL but, due to their Pasifika heritage and cultural awareness, interns were able to promote a deeper and authentic sense of cultural perspectives and thought processes into their work with community groups organically. We now turn to the supervisor perspectives, which emphasize how this took place in a more detailed manner.

#### *Supervisor Perspectives*

A total of four NRL supervisors were asked about their perspectives of the PATHE@NRL partnership, and how they perceived the interns' engagement within the organization and the community groups the NRL works with. Their views are presented here as a chronological retelling, reflecting the same three questions that were also asked of them.

*What have been the benefits of having a PATHE@NRL intern in your team?*

Supervisors expressed their initial caution towards taking on interns, as in times past they seemed to be a potential liability rather than an asset. One supervisor reflected on how they were inundated with work, so the presence of the intern alleviated their workload, for which they were grateful. When this intern was given responsibility, they were noted on their ability to not only manage the work, but as they developed their skills, to add value to their department: “I quickly realized that [the intern] could handle quite a lot, which surprised me... We were shocked with how willing [they were] to just get in, and get [their] hands dirty and *learn*.” (Supervisor C)

Other supervisors noted the fresh thinking that the interns brought with them, and their ability to take part in collaboration and [contribute] significantly to a new project in this case referring to a cultural resource that could be used by potential community stakeholders. This contribution was understood by one supervisor as that which:

would make a real contribution to the social inclusion space which I think will be very beneficial both to our department, to stakeholders that we engage, and then people...[from] different multicultural communities that take part in that space so long term is going to have a positive legacy to all of the above. (Supervisor B)

This supervisor also noted how this one resource had the potential to “boost organizational capacity, [and] their efforts and abilities to engage with new community participants, and . . . the opportunity to help improve their skills, improve their abilities, improve their engagement, and make their efforts more sustainable, and longer-term impact”.

This same supervisor highlighted how this partnership with the NRL was able to “highlight the potential contribution” made by Pasifika interns within the space, and “they’ve been a success in doing so”. It is clear from these perspectives, that the new ideas presented by the PATHE interns, as well as their cultural capital to work within diverse communities that the NRL serves, has bolstered the latter’s ability and reputation to engage meaningfully with these community groups.

Consideration was also given to the fact that the interns kept the NRL “relevant as a program” when engaging with school aged community members and ensured that the organization is “asking the right questions” to these cohorts. The presence of the PATHE interns in high schools was described as “one incredible benefit” by one supervisor (Supervisor A), as they were able to “come out and share their experiences with high school kids who may be thinking about furthering their education” – there was a definite recognition of the relevance of PATHE@NRL interns’ narratives and life experiences in this space, which often resonated with the students they spoke with.

Supervisors would also allow the interns to provide feedback on community engagement: “How do you think *this* went, how do you think we could do it better?” (Supervisor A) Having university students present to do this allowed for “other people who are external [to] come in and see with fresh eyes” (Supervisor A), which led to “really good feedback from the interns.”

Recognition was also given to the fact that some of the interns come from low socio-economic areas, which is consistent with some of the high schools the NRL engages with. This reality meant that “[interns] could really relate to these kids and go through the same experiences” (Supervisor A). As a result of PATHE@NRL interns having prior experience in working with high school students in PATHE, they were able to transfer their skills to the NRL’s community engagement, which created a sense of

familiarity and comfort that only shared experience can bring. One supervisor described this as enabling the intern to “integrate” easier, and therefore be more effective throughout their internship (Supervisor B).

*Do you believe there's been an improvement of Pacific cultural awareness in game as a result of having a Pacific intern?*

Interestingly, the non-Pacific supervisors stated that they saw less development of cultural awareness as a result of the program, whereas Pacific supervisors noticed an increase. One supervisor stated that this is an area that “has been discussed and will be discussed, especially with more talk of building more formal and broad Pacific programs ... and Pacific strategy generally” (Supervisor B). There was a felt Pacific presence amongst the supervisors as a result of the internship, one of whom stated that “for players to see, you know, a familiar face on the other side of the game, helps I guess encourage them to look at ways that they can be involved in the game other than playing” (Supervisor D).

Another supervisor stated that “to have some other young men and women of Pacific background in the office, people seeing them face to face, really sees the value of what our Pacific people can achieve not just on the field, but off the field” (Supervisor A).

There is a recognition that these Pacific interns encourage not only other Pacific players to aspire for employment and other opportunities off field, but also challenge non-Pacific community stakeholders to see that Pacific peoples are capable and effective in these spaces. When translated into Pacific community contexts, this idea has the potential to enhance and empower existing relationships and community stakeholders, so that they are made to feel that their ontological and epistemological preferences are catered for and celebrated by fellow Pacific and non-Pacific staff. This serves to bridge the gap that could potentially exist between the NRL and specifically Pacific community engagement, creating a familiarity for community stakeholders that would encourage more open communication and mutual understanding between the two parties. One supervisor stated that this was the first internship that they have seen where Pacific people have “that door open, I think it brings more not just awareness, but it allows us to have input” (Supervisor A).

*Do you believe that the presence of Pacific interns has had a flow-on effect to elite Pacific players?*

Most supervisors noted that there needed to be more intentional advertising of the internship program for it to promote the flow-on effect to elite Pacific players more effectively. Supervisors could see the potential impact of the internship program for elite players who were looking at pursuing other life goals, such as completing higher education or aspiring for different career opportunities that the NRL presents. It was mentioned that there is an internal communications manager who would be able to assist in this kind of promotion, and also to have such presentations of the internship program and / or interns at the monthly Town Hall meetings, alongside having this information present on the staff intranet, which could more directly impact the elite players.

Recognition was also given to the “positive mutual benefits for the University, for students, and for the NRL” (Supervisor B) as a result of the program, and it should therefore be broadcast to external communications. One supervisor mentioned that having a clear outline of the potential benefits of the program would assist in making its potential more broadly known, and therefore increase the likelihood of elite players being impacted by it.

PATHE@NRL supervisors noted how through the program “we’re able [to break] stereotypes, and those barriers about . . . we’re a bit more than just putting on a jersey and throwing around a ball and just tackling people” (Supervisor D). Consideration was also given to the impact of having interns in high profile positions, which would encourage “conversations [to] start going, and they realize [the intern’s] background, and you know, [that] can only break those walls down even more for people like the other stakeholders to look at . . . other people . . . [that] they can employ” (Supervisor D).

The presence of these interns therefore raises the profile of Pacific people being capable of being professionals within the NRL and the community more broadly, which, in turn, encourages Pacific peoples to be treated with more dignity and seriousness within the labor market. Consequently, when “other government entities and stakeholders [interact] with the game” (Supervisor D), non-Pacific professionals could be more inclined to see the capability of Pacific peoples across all facets of the administration of the NRL, and not only on the field.

There was also recognition of the fact that many Pacific professionals within the administration of the game tend to have a presence in the areas of education and developing welfare / human capital. While this is celebrated, there is a desire amongst supervisors to have Pacific peoples “moving into other key departments . . . ‘cause that’s where hopefully we’re gonna see real change . . . where the decisions are being made up there, so hopefully it filters down” (Supervisor D).

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings from the research heavily overlapped with the literature. A reoccurring theme from the work-integrated learning literature is students gaining more confidence in their ability (Jackson, 2013). Increased confidence, familiarity, and comfortability were themes expressed by students as a result of the program. PhillipsKPA (2014) study of work-integrated learning found organizations were able to access new thinking and ideas, and this was reinforced in the research. Supervisors noted the fresh thinking that the interns brought with them. Similarly, notable was the improvement of Pacific cultural awareness expressed by both the students and supervisors. Atkinson, Misko, and Stanwick (2015, p. 9) stated work-integrated learning is also a way to “access resources for getting jobs done”. This theme arose in the research with a supervisor stating that they were grateful for the interns as they alleviated their workload. As a result of the internship, four of the ten PATHE interns were employed in ongoing positions by their respective departments, highlighting that the work-integrated learning programs realized the first aim of this research project – understanding the benefits of and create opportunities for Pacific students through paid internships at the NRL.

The implications of the research are three-fold; firstly, the research demonstrates the importance of strong partnerships between universities and industries as the strong relationship between the NRL and the university was imperative for effective work-integrated learning. *The National Strategy on Work-Integrated Learning in University Education* (2015) states that “Australia’s future depends on strong partnerships”. Open communication, trusting and supportive partnerships are pivotal steps towards achieving the aim of the research: to increase opportunities and bolster Pacific awareness. The interns were from undergraduate courses that did not require work-integrated learning. The literature on sporting work-integrated learning is primarily based on students in sport and health courses (Agnew, Pill, & Orrell, 2017; Fleming & Hickey, 2013). This shows the uniqueness of the program as it incorporated students from a range of courses into professional roles in the NRL. Both students and supervisors stated the unique internship was immensely valuable – highlighting the need to further

develop and enhance these partnerships as they can provide future benefits for students, universities and industry partners.

The research also recommends both universities and industries to demonstrate clear leadership from both universities and industry partners. Near 50% of the NRL playing cohort are from a Pacific background, however, these roles are not represented amongst the other structures of the game (Ravulo, 2014). To be responsive to these players cultural needs, the NRL needs to ensure representation off the field. This may mean having an increasing number of Pacific people employed in a variety of roles; including playing staff as physiotherapists, club doctors, wellbeing and education managers, and key leadership roles; coaching and executive management positions in the clubs and broader NRL. Clear leadership from universities involves creating and maintaining partnerships with NRL clubs and corporate connections, along with investing and monetarily committing to such programs.

Both the NRL and universities must continue to develop and uphold Indigenous and Pacific platforms and spaces. The NRL have begun to lay down the foundations of inclusion “through a range of programs and events” such as the NRL All Stars Festival, The NRL Indigenous Round and The NRL School to Work Program (Harris, 2018). Universities also have a growing and strong commitment to promoting cultural diversity, as represented by the financial investment in PATHE; showing that the NRL and universities have a shared commitment and aim – the fostering and developing nature of the collaborative partnership between universities, the NRL, and wider community. This realizes the second goal of this research project – that awareness of Pasifika culture was strengthened within the NRL as a result of the professional roles assumed by the interns.

## CONCLUSION

The PATHE@NRL internship program has intentionally challenged stereotypes of the capability and desire of Pasifika peoples to aspire to professional roles within the organization. The employment of PATHE interns shows the program was successful in achieving the first aim, which was to highlight benefits of the internship and create opportunities for Pacific students. The program also fulfilled the second part of the aim; to bolster Pacific awareness in the NRL, particularly in professional roles. As perspectives from both the interns and supervisors have emphasized the important place of cultural awareness in engaging with community stakeholders, and the presence of the PATHE@NRL interns has underscored the need for their innovative ideas, as well as life experiences as Pasifika people raised in Western Sydney. This has created synergy between the NRL and their communities in organic and authentic ways. A constant sentiment of the supervisors was their desire to see the program continue, to encourage a greater development of cultural awareness, as this increases the potency and relevance of NRL programs to the Pasifika communities they engage with on a regular basis. As the number of Pacific players increases, it is incumbent upon the NRL to continue its commitment to realize the potential and continue to create opportunities for Pacific young people to become professionals that are able to operate within both their Pacific worlds and the world of the NRL. Where these opportunities are present, Pacific people can navigate such waters skillfully, and will continue to enhance and promote the NRL to community stakeholders for years to come.

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