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Fakalukuluku: Conceptualising a Tongan learning approach in tertiary education

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Fakalukuluku: Conceptualising a Tongan learning approach in tertiary education

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Abstract

Given the current impact of COVID-19, the learning experiences of Pasifika students within tertiary education has implicated their social and emotional wellbeing. Engaging in a Tongan learning approach, such as fakalukuluku*, can present a viable learning practice for tertiary students' learning experiences. This paper presents the perspectives of four Tongan-born and raised researchers and educators who completed their tertiary education in Aotearoa New Zealand. Based on our experiences and reflections, we propose the Tongan concept of* fakalukuluku *as an approach to help elevate students' academic achievement in tertiary education. Our paper conceptualises and unfolds perspectives of* fakalukuluku*, as a cultural practice that is appropriate, collaborative, and accorded learning stability because of its spiritual dimensions as being paramount to students' success. We propose that a strong family and community support, the utilising of university learning support and the students' spiritual beliefs can help Tongan students in tertiary education succeed.*

Keyword

Learning approach; *fakalukuluku*; academic achievement; tertiary education; spiritual dimensions

Introduction

Fakalukuluku is a Tongan concept associated with gathering-up or drawing-together (Churchward, 1959) and is linked to the theme in the special issue, *talanoa vā* and reimagining research and learning engagement in tertiary education. Within tertiary education, research undertaken by Theodore et al., (2018) examined the key factors that helped and hindered Pasifika (a term utilised by the Ministry of Education in Aotearoa to group students from Pacific ethnicities) university graduates with the completion of their studies. Pasifika graduates identified family as a key factor that contributed to the completion of their qualifications. This included family as a whole as well as individual family members. Similarly, family is perceived as a source of love and encouragement and expectations from family

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members help motivate students to be successful. Conversely, family responsibilities or commitments and issues were noted as having impacting students’ completion (Theodore et al., 2018). However, Toumu‘a and Laban’s (2014) study found family to be a prominent influence because it is a key source of motivation for Pasifika students. A study that was conducted by a Tongan scholar highlighted the significance of utilising traditional cultural models such as *no‘oloto* (a Tongan term that is used by Tongan composers and choreographers) in the Tongan art of *fa’u ta‘anga* (poetry composition), and *hiva* (music) which are implemented to motivate Tongan tertiary students in New Zealand (Kailahi, 2017).

Personal factors which contribute to the academic success of Pasifika students have included good time management and study skills, being able to access help with academic courses, the ability to set and have clarity around goals, perseverance, determination and having a strong reason for being at university (Luafutu-Simpson et al., 2015; Perrot, 2015; Toumu’a & Laban, 2014). Shyness and the lack of self-confidence or motivation have been described as hindering factors (Ali & Narayan, 2016, Benseman et al., 2006; Chu et al., 2013). Researchers have also described how Pasifika students can balance their commitments to their families, communities, work and church and how this can affect academic progress (Benseman et al., 2006; Zepke et al., 2011). Yet at the same time, having a strong religious or spiritual faith has been described as a protective factor (Toumu’a & Laban, 2014).

Having culturally responsive and appropriate pedagogies that acknowledge the worldview of the student and incorporate Pasifika models, metaphors and language have been shown to be important for Pasifika student success in higher education (Ali & Narayan, 2016; Benseman et al., 2006). Pasifika associations, events, spaces, services and programmes can promote a Pasifika presence on campus and environments where Pasifika language, values and culture are the norm (Benseman et al., 2006; Chu et al., 2013). Peer groups and mentors who provide mutual support and encouragement within the university environment are also helpful for Pasifika students (Airini et al., 2009; Mayeda et al., 2016).

Problem statement

Yet despite studies which have identified factors which either support Pasifika student success or pose significant challenges, the achievement of Pasifika students at New Zealand universities remains lower than that of their European/Pākehā counterparts (Matapo & Baice, 2019). There is a need for a deliberate and culturally responsive strategy that both serves to mitigate barriers that prevent achievement and builds on and promotes those factors which have proven to be supportive. As Matapo and Baice (2019) point out, “the art of engagement with traditional wayfinding tools designed for teaching and learning is utilised as a way of generating and reconceptualising notions of Pasifika success as Pasifika …” (p. 26).

Proposal

In this paper, we propose *fakalukuluku*, a concept derived from a Tongan traditional fishing activity, as a new Tongan learning approach, specifically designed to support Pasifika students studying at tertiary level. Our proposition of *fakalukuluku* also considers honouring cultural epistemology, how the student connects and relates to the tertiary world through a Pasifika pedagogy. Therefore, *fakalukuluku* seeks to fill the paucity of learning approaches available for Tongan students in the 21st century that will not only help to improve student retention but authenticate their learning experiences as Tongan/Pasifika students attending polytechnics and universities in New Zealand. Employing Tongan cultural learning approaches such as *fakalukuluku* for students in the tertiary context and institutions is a move to prioritise epistemologies that align with Tongan knowledge and worldviews.

Literature review

The literature review provides an account of the relevant learning approaches considered pertinent in education.

Social constructivism learning theory

Vygotsky (1978) acknowledges that knowledge is social, and it is created through interaction: "Human learning presupposes a specific social nature and a process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 88). Schunk (2008) highlights the important ideas correlated with social constructivism including the *zone of proximal development*—referring to the difference between an individual learner's achievement while working on his or her own and the potential extent of their achievement with the assistance of more able peers or tutors, and scaffolding—the role of language in mediating meaning and collaborative learning and problem solving. Learning is an intervention of different views where learners are facilitated to come upon different perspectives and share meanings, and these social interactions are believed to lead to individual higher levels of learning (Hung, 2001). Educational methods adopting social constructivist principles include: use of small group cooperative and collaborative learning, peer tutoring, reciprocal teaching and learning beginning where the learner is at, interactive learning, cognitive apprenticeship (modelling and coaching a novice towards expert performance), facilitating the learning, peer tutoring, situated learning, jigsaw method, and problem-based learning (Ertmer & Newby, 2013; Fraser & McGee, 2012; Hung, 2001; Mayer, 2003; Motschnig-Pitrik & Holzinger, 2002).

Sociocultural learning theory

Since the mid 1990s, the notion of culture has driven central debates in education (Fraser & McGee, 2012). Culture is made of "more than one general value which generates specific norms, which in turn guide people to act in ways congruent with the 'needs' of the wider social structures in which they operate" (Inglis, 2005, p. 7). The sociocultural views extend constructivist ideas of learning to include the notion that learning and teaching are inherently cultural processes (Barker, 2008). This view incorporates the initial contributions from the early writings of Vygotsky (1962, 1978), and cultural psychologists such as Cole and Engestrom (1993) and Wertsch (1995). Wertsch (1995, p. 11) states that the goal of the sociocultural approach is to "explicate the relationships between human action, on the one hand, and the cultural, institutional and historical situations in which this action occurs, on the other". Fundamentally, understanding how learning occurs requires a focus on how learners participate in activities and practices, and how they draw on the available tools and artefacts and social networks (Nasir & Hand, 2006).

Indigenous Māori learning approaches

Bolstad et al. (2012) claim that the educational systems, structures and practices in New Zealand are not adequate to address and support the learning needs for diverse students in the 21st century. However, empirical evidence from 45 research projects, funded by Ako Aotearoa, '*Māori learner success in tertiary education: Highlights from Ako Aotearoa supported research projects'*, has identified numerous Māori pedagogical approaches such as *tuakana-teina* and *whanaungatanga* contribute to Māori learner success in tertiary education. This has been attributed to the potential of these Māori learning approaches

to be embedded in the culture and being relevant to the learner, which encourages cultural identity and sense of belonging (Sciascia, 2017).

Tuakana-teina, the relationships between an older *(tuakana*) person and a younger (*teina*) person in relation to learning and teaching in Māori context (Rawlings & Wilson, 2013; Reilly, 2010), enhances self-confidence and self-determination through the relationship with mentors which allows students to be efficient and effective learners (Ross, 2008). *Whanaungatanga* is defined as kinship relationships, which is based around the validation of whānau and the extended families (Ritchie, 2003). Both approaches heavily rely on the Māori world, including Māori language, means of sense-making, cultural understandings, language and prior knowledge in which they all support Māori students’ engagement and learning (Bishop et al., 2014; Rawlings & Wilson, 2013).

Regardless of *tuakana-teina, whanaungatanga*, Pasifika practices and other Māori health philosophies instigated as affirming learning approaches, the research by Theodore et al. (2018), *Equity in New Zealand university graduate outcomes: Māori and Pacific graduates,* highlights that Māori and Pacific peoples are under-represented amongst New Zealand universities and their labour market outcomes are often associated with lower wages and under-representation in skilled professions. Boosting the success of Pasifika graduates has been, and continues to be, a priority and challenge for the New Zealand tertiary education sector.

Traditional Tongan learning approaches

Based on the experiences and reflections of the authors of this paper, educated in tertiary institutions in New Zealand, the Indigenous knowledge of Tongan communities has typically been passed down through oral traditions from grandparents to parents and then to children. How Tongan knowledge and approaches are conceptualised and made sense in the New Zealand tertiary context is what this paper intends to share and unfold.

A well-known Tongan story shared to people was of a blind and elderly wayfinder, *Tuita*, who held a chief title in the Fokololo *‘o e Hau* clan. *Tuita* took a voyage with King *Taufa’ahau* from Tonga to Samoa in 1820, which exemplifies wayfaring and navigation as a traditional learning approach. As the voyage took so long, *Taufa’ahau* wanted to know their position in the wild *moana* (ocean). *Tuita* asked his son *Po’oi* to take him to the *kaokao* (side) of the *kalia* (boat) and told the son to locate the positions of certain stars. *Tuita* then *fāfā ki tahi* (tipped his finger into the sea) and put it into his mouth to taste the sea. The elderly navigator informed *Taufa’ahau* that they had arrive in Fiji. After hours of voyaging, an island appeared (*kite)* in Fiji.

Another learning approach is *lalanga*. Baker (1897) and Rabone (1845) both translate the same meaning of *lalanga as* “to weave” (p. 137); “to plait the mats" (p. 149). Malungahu et al. (2017) add similar meaning for *lalanga* as the action of weaving and the main source to *lalanga* a *fala* (weaving a mat) is pandanus plant leaves. *Lalanga* is an ancestral form of art utilised across generations in Tonga. ‘Ilaiu Talei and Memmott (2014) refer to the word *fala* as the double-layer of strands that are “woven together when weaving” (p. 13). MacIntyre (2008) conceptualises the *lalanga fala* or mat weaving as being associated with the formulation of an academic model. In the process of *lalanga*, strands or *fe*‘*eunu* are gathered and weaved to form a whole to complete the *fala* or *lōtaha* as the end-result of weaving (p. 10). Also, taking into account the word whole as *kakato* or “*complete (perfect)*” (Baker, 1897, p. 16). Pau'uvale (2012) applies the *lalanga* to the development of Tongan citizens and the concept of *tangata kakato* (holistic person).

Pasifika learning approaches

The research by Chu et al. (2013), *Educational practices that benefit Pacific learners in tertiary education,* identified three main factors that contribute to the success of Pasifika students in tertiary settings in New Zealand. These consist of appreciative pedagogy, such as family support; teaching and learning relationships, such as mentorship as a learning relationship; and institutional commitment, such as a firm level of institutional support.

Traditional Indigenous and culturally responsive educational experiences for Pasifika students took place within a village context, through storytelling, modelling and guided experience, instilling in young adults locally appropriate knowledge including a nuanced understanding of their environment and the skills and knowledge required to exploit it (Scaglion, 2015). Learning is a communal approach, a conceptualisation of space, time and context in a Pacific setting (Mohamed, 1996). With the impact of Westernisation, there is a growing consciousness among Pasifika educators that bilingualism and biculturalism must be valued in Pasifika pedagogy (Phan & Deo, 2008). There is no one-size-fits-all solution to engaging with Pasifika students and helping them to succeed due to different languages and practices (Aumua & Tominiko, 2016). However, there are some approaches considered in this review as being relevant for Pasifika students and useful to the development of new pedagogical learning approaches that are aligned and appropriate for Tongan students in tertiary education.

A weaving metaphor, the i-Talitali framework was designed by Lingam et al. (2017), Pacific researchers based in the region from a Pacific world-view to enhance research skills and knowledge relating to higher education, academics and students. This also aligns with the idea that appropriate teaching methodologies, cultural contextualisation and customisation of teaching will enhance Pacific learners' engagement in the classroom discussion and with the class curriculum (Thompson et al., 2009). The *nakuita*, a Fijian term for octopus, was a model designed by Linda Aumua in 2008 to provide a foundation for Pasifika engagement at the Pacific Centre for Learning, Teaching & Research. The structural feature of the octopus metaphorically refers to support and provision associated with learning development, including professional development workshops and engaging Pasifika learners for their success in the academic journey (Thompson et al., 2009).

The He Vaka Moana initiative, framed through Oceanic principles and methodologies at the University of Auckland, was to share the ancestral history of navigating the vast Pacific Ocean (Wolfgramm-Foliaki & Smith, 2020). The initiative was designed to look specifically and politically at ways to advance the success of Māori and Pasifika students in higher education. Employing our Indigenous methodologies emphasises cultural ways of being, thinking, speaking and behaving (Wolfgramm-Foliaki & Smith, 2020). Fonofale by Pulotu-Endemann (2001) draws from a metaphor of a Samoan house to promote the philosophy of holism and continuity in the health discipline. This is a dynamic model that incorporates interactive relationships and what is deemed important to the cultural groups and components of Pasifika peoples' health, including family, culture and spirituality (Pulotu-Endemann, 2001).

It is essential to challenge the dominance of western philosophy, content, and pedagogy in the lives and the education of Pasifika, and to reclaim Indigenous perspectives, knowledge and wisdom that have been devalued or suppressed in tertiary education contexts (Thaman, 2003).

Fakalukuluku as a fishing method

Origin

Fakalukuluku is an archaic form of Tongan fishing tradition found specifically in the island of Niuatoputapu, a small (17km^2) island approximately 150km west of the Tonga Trench (Clark et al.,

2011). The richness of the marine ecosystem in Niuatoputapu provided an opportunity for the local people to use *fakalukuluku* to catch certain fish species while leaving others untouched. Traditionally, Niuatoputapu was a subsistence-based lifestyle like the other parts of Tonga, particularly during the 1960s and 1970s, where copra was the main source of income, and the sea remained their main source of food (Dye, 1983).

Stories of *fakalukuluku* were told by elders in kava gatherings across Tonga in the 1970s and reference was made to it during Tongan studies at high school. Yet, despite this, very little was known about the concept of *fakalukuluku*. Later, ethnographers (Matthews, 1993) noted that women as well as men were involved in fishing. However, early ethnographers focused primarily on the way that people of the Niuatoputapu saw the sea as the main source of life for its inhabitants and took interest in their various forms of fishing techniques and tools designed to exploit particular fish species (Dye, 1983).

Definition

Fakalukuluku is a Tongan concept consisting of two words: ‘*faka*’ and ‘*lukuluku*.’ *Faka* is a prefix and when added to a word it becomes a verb or an action. For example, the word ‘*ita*’ means angry. If we add the prefix *faka*, the new word becomes *‘faka’ita’* which translates to ‘act in an angry manner’. ‘*Lukuluku*’ is defined by Churchward (1959) as “… to gather up or draw together (a garment)” (p. 308). In this case, *fakalukuluku* focuses on the notion of connectedness. It is like a puzzle being drawn together where every single piece matters.

Dye (1983) describes *fakalukuluku* as a fishing ritual that involves a fisherman and a piece of bamboo (as a rod) with eight to twelve lines and fishing hooks tied to it. However, several ex-Niuatoputapu elders residing in New Zealand tell similar stories which contradict Dye’s description of *fakalukuluku.* They claimed that instead of a bamboo stick, a big log is used instead. The log has to be strong and is able to float while lines with hooks are tied to it. The purpose of *fakalukuluku* is to catch red fish. The role of the fisherman is to float on the surface of the water and from time to time put his face under the water and check for the redfish and the bait. If other fish species are being caught, they will be released, focusing on red fish only. This fishing is usually done near the reef where it is not too deep and not too shallow, and also the fisherman can have a clear vision of the bottom of the seabed.

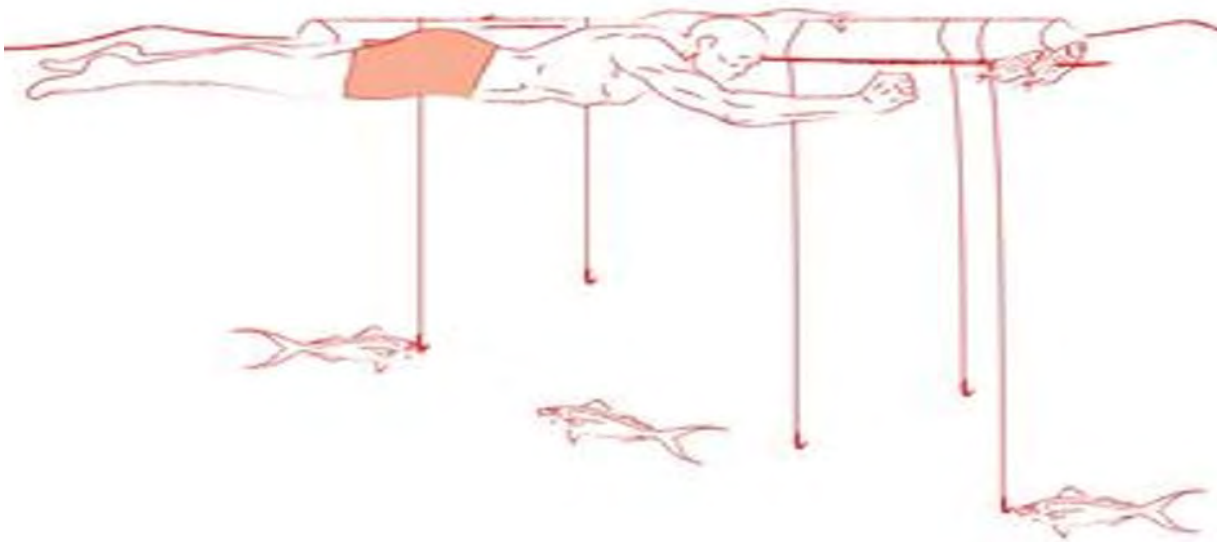

Figure 1. Illustration of *Fakalukuluku* fishing ritual. (Artist: S. Naufahu, 2020)

Fakalukuluku as a Tongan learning approach

The log or the bamboo

The log or the bamboo symbolises a source of strength, power, energy and steadfastness on which the fishing lines and hooks depend for anchorage purposes. The log or the bamboo is pivotal to the *fakalukuluku*, and it is a critical part of this practice which holds together the fishing lines. The log or the bamboo represents the community, families and churches. The term 'community' suggests an environment where unity, equity and connectedness are found. A core component of this is the church, acknowledging the importance of '*lotu*' (spirituality) in the lives of students and the need to provide a strong faith-based community. Tertiary students are part of the community and they should utilise it as a source of support, security and empowerment.

Lines and hooks

The lines and hooks represent Tongan students entering the tertiary environment, encountering different fields of study. While the lines and hooks may be independent as they are being lowered under the water, the ocean (sea of knowledge) connects all of them. The ocean becomes a space where students interact and connect with each other. Within this is recognition of the need for connection with peers both in relation to academic support but also for socialising and ensuring self-care.

Red fish

The red fish symbolises qualifications. The sole purpose of attending the tertiary or the university level is to complete the required qualification/s. Students require support, commitment, determination and skills for this accomplishment. To catch the red fish requires well-prepared bait and a skilful set of the bait on the fishing hook. The focus, determination and wish of the fisherman rests on the potential of the red fish to bite the hook. Therefore, the purpose of the fishing cannot be fulfilled unless the red fish is caught. In the tertiary setting, this aspect requires focus, establishing and regularly reviewing clear goals.

The reef

The reef implies the sea of knowledge. It is symbolic of the wealth of knowledge and pedagogical experiences that students can tap into; for example, through their classes, library and other resources, including people with subject knowledge.

The reef also encapsulates a spiritual dimension as a significant element of *fakalukuluku* which relates to our sense of life-meaning and purpose in the *fakalukuluku* event. The spiritual wellbeing connects the fisherman/fisherwoman to his/her culture, community, family, institution, religion, the land and the ocean. This cultural element of *fakalukuluku* is inextricable from the wellbeing of a Tongan tertiary student. It provides inner strength, wisdom and ethics we hold. The practice of *fakalukuluku* outside of the cultural context lacks meaning, as too does consideration of supporting learning without acknowledging the importance of the spirituality of students.

The fisherman

'The fisherman' refers to the role played by the university or tertiary institution in supporting the student. It is typical for there to be Pasifika student associations, and for the purposes of this model, it would be a Tongan student association which while seeming to be a single body, consists of many persons. The

purpose of this association is to support the current students of the university or tertiary level by contributing to the mitigation of student attrition and guarantee the completion of qualifications. The fisherman also refers to families, groups, churches and the Tongan community. The watchful eyes of the fisherman not only purport the duty of the association but also to help let go of other distractions (other fish species) that deter students’ focus from catching the red fish (qualification).

Fakalukuluku as a learning approach in action

Fakalukuluku can not only be applied as a metaphor to the learning journey with strong links to how support mechanisms for students may occur, but it can also be implemented as a model for engaging, supporting and guiding new Pasifika students at tertiary level. Such a model assumes that there is an association of experienced Tongan/Pasifika students who will work together to undertake this support and guidance through a series of deliberate mentoring, networking and coaching activities. This may become a core function of existing associations or require the formation of a new group specifically for this purpose. The phases and implementation of the model are as follows, with the ‘Action’ section describing specific activities that can be initiated and led by the association of experienced students.

Table 1. Implementation of *Fakalukuluku* Model

	Phase	Action	Purpose
Teuteu Taumata‘u	Locating the right place/community.	Introductory phrase—new students getting to know the student association (including its purpose and model of support) and the local community. Gaining an awareness of who they are and the type of support on offer.	To establish a strong community network for new students at the commencement of their study. This is designed to ensure connections with people (e.g., with student association, churches, fellow students) and place are strong, in order to foster a sense of belonging.
Fakamounu Settings the lines	Creating the environment for success.	Establishing a mentor-mentee relationship.	To develop at least one particularly strong relationship so that the new student has a ‘go to’ person who can be a ‘constant’ throughout their study, providing a type of anchor for them.
		Setting clear academic goals and ensuring the necessary supports are in place (e.g., study groups, timetable).	To create a clear pathway for new students, so that they can have assessment dues dates and workload clearly in their line of sight and have realistic strategies in place around how to reach these.

		Starting to build friendships with other Pasifika students and community.	To recognise the strong social need to students and the value of shared experiences with the intent that they can be both supported but in turn provide support for others.
Taumata'u Watching the lines, maintaining the bait, removing non-target fish.	Nurturing the student and their learning journey.	Regular events to provide social support.	To provide opportunities to keep the connections with support networks strong. Also, to allow breaks from study to pause and refresh and take part in self-care.
		Regular checking in around academic progress and goals. Resetting where required. Working together on remaining focused and removing barriers and/or distractions.	To ensure that the academic pathway is well on track. Also serves a purpose of accountability.
		Mentor linking up new student with any additionally required support and opportunities.	To make sure extra support is able to be accessed when needed. Could include tapping into wider support within the tertiary institution or community if required.
Fusi ika Bringing in the catch.	Reaching the qualification goal.	Mentor supporting the student through the final phase of study (e.g., final assignments, submission deadlines).	To support the student through what is often an extremely busy and pressured period. This could include navigating qualification completion requirements.
		Celebrating success as a community of learners.	To acknowledge the hard work and success of the student. This may also be a positive example for other or prospective students who are at a different phase. Can also be used to recognise the role of community support.
		Supporting the learner to move beyond study e.g., seeking employment, career pathway, professional body requirements.	To ensure that maximum benefit is gained from the study journey.

Fakalukuluku in action: Some considerations

As a learning approach, the *fakalukuluku* model is yet to be trialled, but has a solid basis in the reflections provided by the four Tongan authors/educators/students/researchers in this paper.

The Teuteu Taumata'u phase firmly places the new student within their local Pasifika community, connecting the learner to families, churches, associations and communities. This operating space is overloaded with '*mafana'* (warmth), *'ofa'* (love), '*tokangaekina'* (care), *'poupou'* (support) and, above all, its culturally responsive manner. This network can be further strengthened in the Fakamounu and Taumataʻu phases through linking the students with mentors and allowing opportunities for social interaction and reflecting the importance that the research participants placed on an inter-connected support system.

Key characteristics of *fakalukuluku* include building relationships and trust among participants, setting clear obligations, working together for a common goal, promoting interactions among members, making smart decisions, communicating effectively and inspiring and empowering each other. Within this is the expectation that some supports may be outside the Pasifika network. In referring to the mentor linking up new students with any additionally required supports and opportunities, the Taumataʻu phase recognises both the value the research participants found in being able to access wider supports (such as university learning services) and the need they saw for this to occur early in their study.

Emphasising the centrality of '*lotu*'(spirituality) described by the research participants, the *fakalukuluku* learning approach also identifies spiritual aspects as a significant component of a Pasifika student's journey at tertiary level through specifically including this in the Teuteu Taumata'u phase and envisaging that it retains its importance throughout all phases. These aspects of the model validate the view of Pasifika students that church is a space of mediation of education and spirituality. That is, a space where spiritual aspects help to '*fakakoloa*' (enrich), '*fakalotolahi*' (encourage), and allow them to thrive with their education.

Talanoa and *talaloto*: Our experiences and reflections

We, as Tongan postgraduate students and educators, share our experiences and reflections. We employ *talanoa* (Vaioleti, 2006) and *talaloto* (Naufahu, 2018) to reflect on our learning experiences at the University of Waikato and how we draw from these to conceptualise *fakalukuluku* as an appropriate cultural approach for the improvement of students' learning in tertiary settings. Mefi Naufahu and Siuta Laulaupea'alu are currently working on completing their PhD at the university of Waikato. Sangata Kaufononga and ʻElisapesi Havea are recent doctoral graduates also from the University of Waikato. All of us completed our Master's degree at the same institution, and the reflections that we contribute to in this paper are integrations of our experiences during our studies across our Master's and PhD programmes.

The three factors that are key to our learning and contribute to our success at the University of Waikato are:

1. The importance of networks of an inter-connected support system.
2. The importance of utilising university learning support.
3. The centrality of *'lotu'* (spirituality) in the learning experience.

The importance of networks of inter-connected support system

We all commented on the importance of support provided by those around us at home and also in the Tongan community. While we specifically identified family, friends, the Tongan community, church groups, kava groups and women's groups in our *talanoa* and *talaloto*, it is of note that the emphasis was

on the connectivity of our networks and support system and the way in which we combined them to strengthen the support.

> It was the main aim of every Tongan family for their children to attend universities at some stage of their lives. But now it is about intertwining of the community, home and the tertiary contexts. *(Mefi Naufahu)*

> I am so grateful to the numerous materialistic, intellectual and emotional support given to me by so many people and different groups within the Tongan community, from individual people, groups, churches and the Tongan community as a whole, to the help services provided by the university. Collectively, this collaborative support enabled my thesis to be completed. *(Siuta Laulaupea'alu)*

This implies that support may come from multiple sources and that each of them needs to be recognised as being potentially significant in both its individual function and contribution to the whole.

The usefulness of university learning support

The university learning support offered was useful for us. Specific people and their services helped our learning and success. However, knowing about the learning support and services earlier on in our postgraduate journey would have been more helpful.

> I am getting near to the end of my study and when I look back and reflect on my journey, I wish that the understanding of the support, determinations and approaches I have now were there at the beginning of my journey. I was not aware of the available support at the university. I did not have a mentor or a supporting person to mentor me and explain the best learning approach that I should take at the beginning of my first-year journey. It would have made a huge impact on my study. *(Mefi Naufahu)*

> However, I wish that I knew about these services and people earlier. I could have finished earlier and not had those pressures earlier in my study journey. Since having access to these services and people, I enjoyed my learning more. *(Siuta Laulaupea'alu)*

> The student learning services were significant during my academic journey. They provided assistance such as proofreading your work, and your time management skills could be improved if you go and talk to them. *('Elisapesi Havea)*

The authors agree that the support would have been helpful from the beginning of our first year of study and that the effect of this may have been quite significant, with the authors believing that the impact could have improved our personal enjoyment through to the length of time that it took to complete our studies. The absence of a 'mentor or support person', as described by Siuta Laulaupea'alu, is a useful service for students.

The centrality of *'lotu'* (spirituality) in the learning experience

Connecting with our faith was significant in our wellbeing and the maintenance of challenges as well as our social relations.

> God's grace had been the guiding factor for this study. The holy spirit has empowered, encouraged, and consecrated me to carry on when I was in doubt and thinking of giving up. His blessing was also presented through church members who emotionally and intellectually supported me with this journey. *(Mefi Naufahu)*

> I have been blessed with numerous blessings (family, friends, community) and no doubt that this study is dedicated to the heavenly Father for allowing me to complete my thesis. Without His guidance I would not have completed this study. I give him the honour and glory. *(Sangata Kaufononga)*

Lotu (spirituality) in terms of both their personal spiritual journey and relationship with God and also through the way in which members of their church community were able to provide them with ‘emotional’ and ‘intellectual’ support.

Discussion

Our experiences and reflections highlight what contributed to our success and equally, what factors may have further improved our experience and outcomes. Family support as outlined by Theodore et al. (2018) and Toumu‘a and Laban (2014) is important. The way in which family, as part of the collective support network rather than singling them out specifically, is required. Families are viewed as one part of a whole support network. However, family highlights the power of a collective community and the positive influence they can have on Pasifika learners. It also suggests that for students who do not necessarily have a network of immediate family, for instance, students who have travelled from Tonga to study, they can still achieve a sense of community through the support of the wider network of Tongan and Pasifika people in the area.

Study skills and time management are vital to students’ success (Luafutu-Simpson et al, 2015; Perrot, 2015; Toumu‘a & Laban, 2014). In specifically mentioning the role of a mentor, we suggested that external support related to study would be helpful to keeping students on track. We view the university as being a valuable source of support in these areas. However, there was a consistent voice and regret around not having been able to access this earlier in our studies. The majority of us did not know that until later in our journey.

The pedagogical approaches at university did not align well with how we learn (Benseman et al., 2006). The *lotu,* or our spirituality or faith and the role of the church, was important in our drive to succeed at university. Our faith was what helped us realise that our challenges and struggles could be released and alleviated by a higher being. While recognised by Toumu’a and Laban (2014) as being supportive for Pacific students’ success in higher education, we add that *lotu* was a central pillar of equal weighting to other social and cultural factors that were suggested important to mediating our learning journey. Taking the three core factors identified, (1) family and community support, (2) access to academic and study support, and (3) *Lotu fakalukuluku* as a learning approach, we, the authors, agree that further exploration of the approach with university and polytechnic students raised in New Zealand is necessary and would add another layer to its possibilities and usefulness.

Conclusion

The *fakalukuluku* learning approach has provided success for Tongan tertiary students to easily access and help navigate their study at university. The *talanoa* and *talaloto* by the authors have provided understanding and appreciation of Indigenous cultural knowledge and approaches within the current tertiary education system. The *fakalukuluku* cultural learning approach is unfolded in this paper, emphasising the different layers of understanding, expertise and experiences required. The *lotu*, or spiritual space and faith is important in *fakalukuluku* through the sharing of knowledge and understanding where participants share common interests and goals. However, the *fakalukuluku* cultural learning approach requires further contextualisation across tertiary institutions for diverse Tongan students.

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