

# First-Year Pacific Students' Perception of Their Well-Being Journey at University in Aotearoa New Zealand

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## Abstract

The well-being of tertiary students is of global interest given increasing rates of mental health problems amongst students internationally; these are often exacerbated by cultural inequities. This qualitative study explored the perspectives of first-year Pacific students, a minority community studying at a university in Aotearoa New Zealand, about factors important to their health and well-being. We interviewed 30 students using the Talanoa method, a Pacific specific approach to collecting data that enables the interviewer and interviewee to connect well during the process. The Fonofale Model, a holistic framework for examining well-being, was utilised to guide the discussion. Interviews were completed in Semester One, April-May 2019, the first wave of a larger longitudinal project. Data were uploaded into NVivo software for data management and were analyzed using the Kakala methodology. Four themes, relating to influences on Pacific students' well-being, were identified and these were: the important role their families played, their cultural identity, spirituality, and engagement with support services offered. Tertiary institutions can play a significant role in supporting the health and well-being of Pacific students. Success in tertiary education is crucial to breaking the cycle of poor health and well-being and social outcomes for Pacific peoples in Aotearoa New Zealand.

## Keywords

Pacific, Well-Being, Mental Health, University Students, Fonofale Model

## 1. Introduction

Mental health problems amongst tertiary students internationally are increasing and are a global public health concern (Sheldon et al., 2021). In Aotearoa New

Zealand (NZ), youth mental health has declined over time and most indicators are worse for Māori, Pacific and Asian students (Sutcliffe et al., 2023). In this paper, we refer to Pacific or Pacific peoples as those who have migrated from the Pacific Islands to reside in NZ. This includes students who may be here temporarily while they complete their studies. Pacific peoples make up approximately 9% (8.86%) of the NZ population (Statistics New Zealand, 2024a). Pacific researchers have highlighted that Pacific peoples experience mental distress at higher rates than non-Pacific in NZ and that Pacific mental health literacy is low (Ataera-Minster & Trowland, 2018; Kapeli et al., 2020). High stigma and low help-seeking surrounding mental health were also noted. Pacific peoples are a youthful population with 31% aged under 15 years and a median age of 25 years (Statistics New Zealand, 2024a). Pacific youth in NZ experience are “young and Pacific” as having familial and community roles, responsibilities, and experiences, including assisting their older, non-English speaking family members to navigate the health system (Ministry of Health, 2023). They are often the first in their families to attend tertiary education (Teevale & Teu, 2018). Pacific youth seek more culturally safe pathways into the health workforce and educational journeys that support those dreams (Ministry of Health, 2023). Although Pacific youth experience cultural challenges and stressors for mental health, they are likely to feel discomfort in seeking help, similarly to most young people in NZ (Khadij, 2018; Ministry of Health, 2023).

Pacific students, similar to all other students, need to successfully navigate the transition from high school to university education (Sheldon et al., 2021; Teevale & Teu, 2018). Those who complete their first year of tertiary study successfully, are more likely to progress to complete their degrees (Earle, 2018). For Pacific students, existing inequities during this transition period can impact on their overall mental health and well-being (Teevale & Teu, 2018). Good student mental health has been shown to contribute to better academic achievement, with poor mental health contributing to reduced academic achievement and higher drop-out rates (Hubble & Bolton, 2020; Hysenbegasi et al., 2005; Sheldon et al., 2021; Teevale & Teu, 2018). In general, during the transition to university, student mental health outcomes can be affected by a range of physiological, relational, lifestyle, psychological, educational, and sociodemographic factors (Sheldon et al., 2021). Broader, systemic issues concerning the university environment are likely to play a role (Sheldon et al., 2021).

Previous qualitative work with Pacific youth, specifically Cook Island Māori, identified that a connection to their ethnic culture as well as their ethnic Pacific language was an important enabler of mental health and well-being (Puna & Tiatia-Seath, 2017). The same study showed that social support was also a strong enabler, including positive family relationships that allowed open discussions about issues (in general, social support is likely to support youth mental health) (Puna & Tiatia-Seath, 2017). More specifically to the experience of Pacific youth during their first year of university, Teevale and Teu (2018) found that family support,

Pacific support services, and mainstream academic support services were enablers of success. Conversely, a barrier to students' academic achievement was their perceived expectations from family and friends to do well in their studies. Another study with Pacific tertiary students has highlighted that indigenous ways of learning prioritise collective learning rather than individual (Mayeda et al., 2014). It found that when Pacific students see other students of Pacific ethnicity in tertiary education, they are encouraged to "follow the same pathway". It is evident that traditional models of tertiary education need to be adapted to be more culturally inclusive, therefore increasing the likelihood of success of Pacific tertiary students (Sopoaga et al., 2024).

Whilst there is little research specifically on the first year university experiences of minority groups, including Pacific, a recent systematic review has synthesised international qualitative studies of indigenous youth well-being in higher education (Durmush et al., 2024). The authors identified that enablers of Indigenous tertiary students' well-being include the presence on campus of Indigenous student centres and units; peer community support; and student "resilience". Barriers to student well-being included culturally unsafe higher education environments and a lack of culturally safe/appropriate wellbeing services, along with barriers that may be considered applicable to first-year students in general, such as homesickness and financial stress. The authors highlighted that Indigenous students may feel a greater obligation to serve their families and communities than non-Indigenous, requiring them to be pulled away from their studies to help. Another recent study explored the effect of a Brief Intervention on minority tertiary students' well-being and sense of belonging, finding that the video intervention successfully helped reframe some of the students' negative beliefs, thus enabling a stronger sense of belonging at university (Strayhorn, 2021). A sense of belonging may be a buffer to the negative impacts of social isolation.

Internationally, the prevalence of mental health disorders for tertiary student populations is high. Between 2014-2017, baseline research from the World Health Organisation (WHO) indicated that during their lifetime, over one third (35.3%) of 13,984 full-time first-year university students, from 19 colleges across eight high-income countries, met the criteria for at least one diagnosis from a list of common (DSM-IV) mental health disorders (Auerbach et al., 2018). The life time prevalence of a major depressive episode was 21.3% and of a generalised anxiety disorder was 18.6%, and the prevalence of less common conditions (such as mania) ranged from 3.5% to 6.8%. According to a recent systematic review, a quarter (25%) of undergraduate students, from eight studies of 13,790 participants, suffered from depression; and 14%, from four studies of 2,586 participants, experienced suicidal outcomes (that is, suicidal ideation, suicidal thoughts and behaviours, and completed suicides) (Sheldon et al., 2021). The review identified that the transition phase between high school and university put students' mental health under pressure.

Our quantitative research has shown that Pacific first-year students' poor mental health outcomes were associated with self-identifying with multiple ethnicities

(being “multi-ethnic”) and experiencing current financial hardship, while positive mental health outcomes were associated with a sense of belonging, low financial stress, and sole-Pacific ethnicity (Sopoaga et al., 2023). In general, poor student mental health has also been linked with a lack of religious affiliation or identifying as a sexual minority (Auerbach et al., 2018; Sheldon et al., 2021). The role that religion plays in students’ mental health is complex. Staying connected to their faith in the tertiary environment can support Pacific students’ overall well-being and sense of belonging while honouring their families and cultural upbringing (Lautua & Tiatia, 2023; Ng Shiu, 2011). However, it can also be a source of stress, where church commitments impact allocated study time and are therefore perceived as a burden (Ng Shiu, 2011).

The mental health and well-being of Pacific tertiary students studying at universities in NZ is a vital link to improved health and social outcomes for Pacific peoples (Kokaua et al., 2023; Sopoaga et al., 2023). A recent study found that highly educated Pacific families’ children were more likely to have good health outcomes (Kokaua et al., 2023). Educational pathways are seen as key to future Pacific well-being (Mahara, 2024). It is well understood that good mental health is essential for student success in higher education. However, little is known specifically about Pacific students and the impact of well-being on their academic journeys (Sopoaga et al., 2023). Good mental health as a facilitator of the academic success of Pacific students in NZ is crucial to breaking the cycle of inequities (Kokaua et al., 2023; Mahara, 2024). The Pacific population has a higher unemployment rate than the NZ population and the lowest rate of “highest qualifications” (Statistics New Zealand, 2024b, 2024c). Therefore, it is crucial to stress the significance of cultural contexts for attaining favorable results and the role that higher education plays in eliminating inequities and providing adequate networks (Sopoaga et al., 2020).

This research, “Ola Malohi” (meaning “living well” in Tokelauan), aimed to explore over a three-year period the factors that support the mental health and well-being of Pacific students studying at the University of Otago, a tertiary institution in NZ, and to identify barriers to students’ well-being and academic success. The longitudinal study, using mixed methods, explored a range of issues concerning Pacific students’ background, expectations and experiences, program of study, goals and aspirations, identity, and perception of their health and well-being during their tenure as undergraduate students. This paper presents the qualitative results from the first semester of their first year at university, sharing their perspectives on their experiences about their health and well-being during that time. Quantitative results from the same period are reported elsewhere (Sopoaga et al., 2023).

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Research Methodology and Cultural Context: Positioning within a Pacific Worldview

This is a Pacific-led research project, undertaken with Pacific students, on an area important to Pacific health. The lead author (LS) is of Samoan descent living in

NZ, who, from the lens of sharing many demographic commonalities with the participants, led all data analyses with support from co-authors. A Professor of Pacific Health (FS) led the original research and oversaw all aspects of the study (Sopoaga et al., 2020). The study was undertaken within an academic department of Pacific health at a NZ university.

## 2.2. Methodology and Method

The Talanoa method (Vaiolati, 2006) and the Kakala methodology (Thaman, 1992) were utilized for this research. Talanoa is a common word in some Pacific languages and simply means to have a conversation. Talanoa is a practice used by Pacific ethnic communities for sharing traditional knowledge and stories or discussing issues of importance. Talanoa can be used in formal or informal settings. Prior to the Talanoa, the space for engagement is organized so that it is suitable for the purpose of the meeting. The purpose of the Talanoa determines the protocols to be adhered to. Informal Talanoa is less structured and can occur either before or after the formal processes. The informal conversations allow people to speak freely and are not determined by rank or cultural protocols. Where both formal and informal approaches are used together for data collection, these can contribute to the depth of information collected. Understanding the context in which conversations are carried out is important to ensure that there is safety for all involved, the purpose is clear, and outcomes are achieved. In the context of this research, the Talanoa was held with Pacific students who were starting their academic journey within a tertiary institution. The environment was prepared to ensure they understood what the Talanoa was about and that they felt safe to share their views within this context. The formalities were limited to ensuring students knew the purpose for the interview, including their rights as participants. Then the interview took on an informal approach guided by open-ended questions to encourage participants to speak openly about their perspectives.

The methodology informing this research is the Tongan “Kakala” methodology (Fua, 2009; Fua, 2014; Thaman, 2003). Metaphorically, the process of undertaking research is likened to the making of a traditional flower garland, beginning with the gathering of flowers “Toli”, or the obtaining of information through consultation. Toli and Talanoa are similar in that they are both involved in this early phase of information gathering. In our research, the information gathered was transcribed and each participant was given a unique identifier including a fictitious name to protect their identity. Data were then uploaded to NVivo 12 software for data management and preparation for analyses (coding). This initial groundwork provided the foundation and preparation for the next stage of the research process. This is called “Tui”: the weaving together of flowers for the making of the garland (Thaman, 2003). The process for selecting suitable flowers for the making of a garland is carefully done. Flowers that did not have the right fit or shape for the purpose of the research were removed, while those that had the right fit were selected and carefully integrated into the making of the garland. This

is the analyses stage which involved the bringing together of all relevant information and continually analyzing the data aligned with the aims of the research. The final stage of the research process is “Luva”, in which the research outcomes are presented back to the community from where information was gathered, for their benefit (Thaman, 2003). This includes the presentation of the Kakala to the designated guests. The completion and dissemination processes are very important parts of the Luva process, as they are about acknowledging the importance of those who contributed to the research. The key stakeholders who are the participants have the right to access this information in a timely manner. Decision makers and those that can influence outcomes through access to evidence are also important stakeholders in the dissemination of research outcomes.

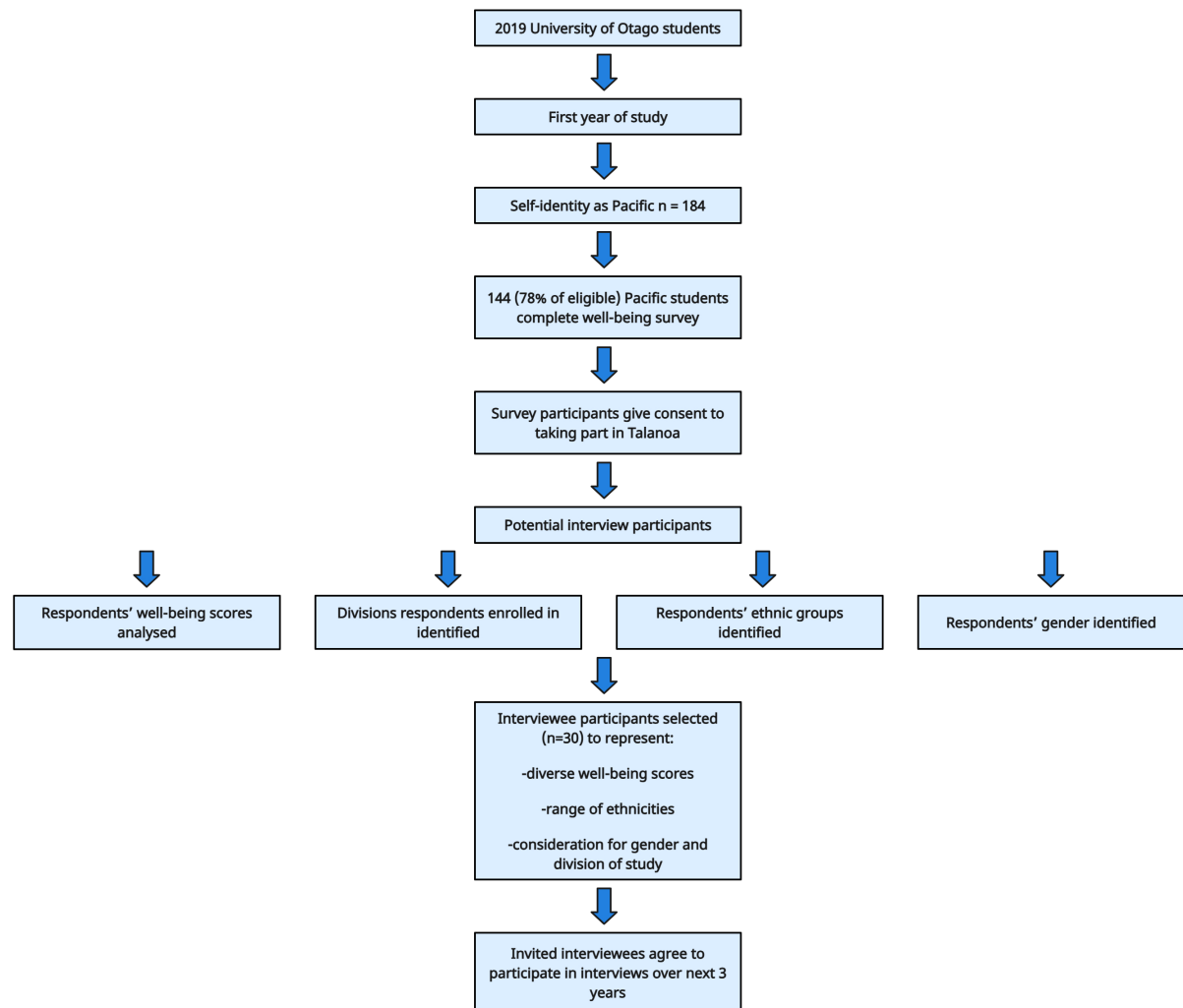
### 2.3. Participants

In 2019, all first-year students at the University of Otago who self-identified as Pacific were eligible to participate. Of the 184 eligible first-year Pacific students, 144 (78%) completed an online survey (Sopoaga et al., 2023). Of these, 30 students aged between 17 to 18 years were invited to be involved in interviews each year over the next three years, to represent a range of scores from their online well-being survey (approximately half with low well-being and half with high well-being) and to include diverse Pacific ethnic groups represented in the survey (Figure 1). Before committing to the study, all interview participants provided informed consent and agreed to be involved over the three-year period.

All interviews were undertaken in the English language as it was expected that all students embarking on studies at university level would be comfortable to converse in English. Interviews were held face to face at an agreed site on the university campus and were approximately an hour long. They were facilitated by two interviewers, one Samoan (Pacific) and the other “palagi” (non-Pacific), who interviewed 15 participants each. They followed a semi-structured format due to the conversational nature of the Talanoa, with its emphasis on facilitating trust and relationship between interviewer and interviewee (above), and questions and prompts were used as per the interview guide (Appendix). Interviews were digitally recorded. After each interview, the participant received a \$20 gift voucher to acknowledge their contribution to the study.

As described above, interviews were transcribed and uploaded into NVivo. Initially, the primary author (LS) coded all Talanoa One interview data into 22 broad areas. These broad areas were further analyzed, and the data were revised and recoded to fewer categories aligned with emerging themes (as per the Kakala methodology). The processes of coding and recoding allowed the refining of the data to identify key themes. As a reliability check, one of the co-authors (FS) independently reviewed three of the transcribed interviews and identified key themes that were similar or matched those identified by the primary author (LS).

Ethics approval was obtained from the University of Otago Human Research



**Figure 1.** Participant selection procedure.

Ethics Committee (18/150), and the University’s Indigenous Māori research protocols were adhered to.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Demographics

The 30 participants interviewed self-identified with eight different Pacific ethnic groups, as well as Māori and NZ European; one-third identified as Samoan, the largest Pacific group (Table 1). Participants were able to nominate multiple ethnic groups. There were more female participants than male (in keeping with the ratio of the entire first-year Pacific cohort). Most (23) of these first-year students were from NZ; the remainder were from overseas, including one from the Pacific Islands. Half were studying Health Sciences; the other half were from a combination of other programs offered through the University. Approximately two-thirds were living in a Residential College on campus, and the rest lived in a flat, stayed with parents, or lived at a “Fofoa” (Pacific accommodation for first-year students).

**Table 1.** Talanoa one: participant demographic factors and characteristics.

Category	Label	Number	Percentage	
<i>Ethnicity</i>	Samoan	11	36.6	
	Cook Island Māori	6	20.0	
	Fijian	2	6.7	
	Fijian Indian	3	10.0	
	Tongan	4	13.3	
	Tuvaluan	2	6.7	
	Tokelauan	2	6.7	
	Niuean	3	10.0	
	Papua New Guinean, Rotuman	2	6.7	
	<i>Total Pacific</i>		30	100.0
	NZ European	13	43.3	
	Māori	1	3.3	
Other	1	3.3		
<i>Country of birth</i>	Aotearoa New Zealand	23	76.7	
	Pacific Islands	1	3.3	
	Other (overseas)	6	20.0	
<i>Self-identified gender</i>	Female	18	60.0	
	Male	12	40.0	
	Other	0	0	
<i>Age (years)</i>	17	2	6.7	
	18	24	80.0	
	19	3	10.0	
	20	1	3.3	
<i>Religious affiliation</i>	Christian	23	76.7	
	None	5	16.6	
	Other religion	2	6.7	
	Unsure	0	0	
<i>Programme of study</i>	Health Sciences	14	46.7	
	Humanities	13	43.3	
	Science	7	23.3	
<i>Study accommodation</i>	University Residential College	21	70.0	
	With parents, guardians or family	3	10.0	
	Sharing a flat or house with others	3	10.0	
	Living in a studio or similar on their own	1	3.3	
	“Fofoa” Pacific accommodation for first-year students	2	6.7	

The Residential Colleges that many first-year students lived in were usually owned and administered by the University: housing, on average, two to three hundred students each. Amenities included tutorials organized by the College, designated spaces to study, and a plentiful supply of nutritious food with three meals a day provided. Advantages of residential accommodation included the opportunity for students to develop networks and make new friends, and to gain a sense of independence. While the benefits of staying in a Residential College are evident, it is not affordable for most Pacific students unless they secure sponsorship through scholarships. The University does offer a range of competitive scholarships for all first-year students. Some local participants chose to stay at home during their first year. This was mostly due to financial factors, with the students wishing to help their families where possible. Some of these students felt they missed out on the benefits of the first-year experience through Residential Colleges, but they had the opportunity to participate in a university “locals program” which gave them a similar experience. A small number of participants stayed in “flats” (rental accommodation shared by multiple student tenants). These students also tended to feel as if they missed out on the first-year experience and that they were disadvantaged and isolated compared to their peers in Residential Colleges. Despite these barriers to connection, participants living in flats utilized other programs the university provided, including Pacific-specific support.

Most participants had been raised in Christian households and for many, attending church was still important. A few participants had no spiritual or religious affiliation, had other (non-Christian) forms of religious/spiritual belief, or were unsure about their own belief systems.

Four key themes from the Talanoa were identified: the importance of family; the role of cultural identity; spirituality; and engagement with support services.

### **3.2. Theme One: The Importance of Family**

All participants emphasised the importance of the support from their families. Many reflected on the sacrifices their grandparents, parents and extended family had made when they left the familiar surroundings of their home countries in the Pacific to migrate to NZ. They understood that this was to give them better education and employment opportunities. Most students were acutely aware of the hope that their families had for their success. Many were the first in their families to attend higher education and felt alone and homesick, and admitted it was difficult to leave their families and familiar surroundings. However, making a phone call home and hearing encouraging words or a prayer was often what they needed to settle back into their studies. Many held on to the stories of their families’ sacrifices and used these as a source of inspiration and motivation to remain on course. One participant reflected on how, as new migrants to NZ, his family would struggle to make ends meet during the week. This had inspired him to continue his education and attend university in order to support his family financially in the long term:

“...and my Dad works two jobs to just like try, and sometimes we’ll have only like \$20 to work with like in a week so I guess that inspires [me] to like get a good job, get a good education, because I’m very lucky to be doing this because some of my family back home don’t get the chance, just like, you know, most Pacific Islanders” —Atamu

### 3.3. Theme Two: Stress Related to Expectations

While participants expressed gratitude and reliance on their families for support, there were also stresses related to either perceived or real expectations from their families. These expectations included the types of courses they were encouraged to enrol in or the reminder to perform well in their course of study. Internal conflict arose when their interests in a programme of study or career pathway were different from the hopes and aspirations of their families. In these situations, there was a reluctance to disappoint their families and students undertook studies that they were not fully committed to:

“But it was never a dream of mine to be a doctor. Like I always liked science it’s just that it was never a dream. And, um, so yeah, when I came here it was really hard for me to appreciate everything here. I was just following, like what I, I was just doing what I was told” —Herota

These familial expectations, representing hope for their families’ futures, also meant that many participants were reluctant to discuss with their families the challenges of studying within the university environment. They did not want to “spoil” their families’ hopes and dreams by sharing the realities of the journey.

Theme Two: The role of cultural identity

In this cohort of Pacific first-year tertiary students, cultural and identity aspects were intertwined. At this stage of life, many first-year students grapple with issues of identity, and for our participants, identity issues were made more complex by cultural factors. Participants who had an affirmative cultural upbringing, whether in New Zealand or the Pacific region, tended to have a relatively strong sense of cultural identity. Affirmative cultural upbringing is where the practice of cultural customs was encouraged in the home environment, the use of their ethnic language was highly valued and/or participants had ongoing engagements with their community activities. Participants’ cultural identity was partly related to their knowledge of language and its role in shaping their identity. These participants had grown up in homes where a Pacific ethnic language was spoken regularly, although English was still used occasionally. They shared many similarities in their upbringing, including adherence to strict cultural protocols outlined by their parents and the traditions of churchgoing where their ethnic Pacific languages were also spoken.

For one participant, growing up with Pacific-speaking grandparents, in hindsight, had helped that student to appreciate the value of nurturing her language and passing it down to future generations. Although, during her childhood, Peta experienced conflicting motivations around needing to learn English for school

and maintaining her Pacific ethnic language, by her first year at university she was appreciative of the role that her grandparents played:

“...Our parents wanted us to maintain our [Pacific language], but we needed to, like, improve our English so that we could do well in school and stuff. Um, so that was like kind of hard to balance and it’s... but, because I’ve spent so much time like in school and stuff now my English is better than my [Pacific language] which is, which I didn’t care about before but now that I’m getting older it’s important to me that I don’t lose that.” —Peta.

However, for NZ-born multi-ethnic participants, the role of culture in shaping their identity was generally more complex. Most of the 23 participants who were born in NZ felt isolated from their culture, particularly if they did not speak their language at home. Many expressed pride in their Pacific culture and the tangible, culturally symbolic aspects such as tattoos, music, and food. Many participants shared the importance of their families, church, friends and relationships with others, including practising shared Pacific values of humility, kindness, honesty, and respect. However, they often questioned their ethnic identity and sense of belonging. Many expressed a desire to be more involved with their ethnic Pacific culture within the tertiary environment or in the community. Some found it challenging to find their place and connect within the Pacific Island community because their upbringing was within a Eurocentric culture.

For some NZ-born participants, language shaped their sense of cultural identity or lack of it. They were unable to understand or speak their ethnic Pacific language and sometimes felt that they did not belong in either culture. For example, they were either “too brown” to be with the non-Pacific students, or not “brown enough” to be with the Pacific students. Loreta, a multi-ethnic participant, struggled with internal feelings of not belonging due to her limited Samoan cultural knowledge and language:

“Um, well I think for me, I like, I just feel like, but this is like just me, but I feel like I don’t belong because um, like I just, I’m not that 100% Samoan per se because I don’t speak it and I’m not like full-blooded.” —Loreta.

An exception to this were some multi-ethnic students who had gained more knowledge about their Pacific culture, and a strong sense of identity while attending university. Salamasina, who had both Samoan and NZ European ancestry, shared that growing up she did not know much about her Samoan culture, but since coming to university had grown to appreciate and feel more comfortable within this context:

“The university as a whole goes, um, closer than I was at home. I have more opportunity to meet with other Pacific Island students and talk with them and um, I see a lot more displays of the culture around and at the Pacific Island Centre as well it’s really nice to just walk in and see all of that.” —Salamasina.

### 3.4. Theme Three: Spirituality

Most participants shared Christian churchgoing as a common aspect of their upbringing. As above, they also had in common strict parenting, which had come with expectations of continued regular church attendance after they left home. During their first year at university, the role of the Christian faith in their lives was variable. For some, the discipline of regular church attendance, instilled through parental expectations, enabled them to maintain their faith and religious journey away from home. They had gained a renewed sense of the importance of personal faith, recognizing Christian faith as a key value that held a central place in their lives. One student, Kaloline, described her spiritual journey as the most important thing in her life and away from home, she continued along this path with regular church attendance and surrounding herself with people who shared the same beliefs. She had strengthened her faith by actively choosing this for herself:

“...Um, so yeah, being down here like part of being independent, making your own decisions, that’s definitely made me, um, my faith stronger because I’ve decided myself that I want to follow this and, yeah. And um, I felt like I’m doing more down here with my faith than when I was in [home-town] so, yeah” —Kaloline.

On the other hand, for some students who moved to the university for study, being exposed to a wider range of beliefs created uncertainty and confusion. Participants encountered different worldviews, cultures, ideas and values compared to those they had grown up with, leaving some feeling perplexed. Peni shared that since he had moved to the University, he was more exposed to a wider range of cultures and beliefs leaving him unclear on what to believe and trust:

“I grew up as a Catholic, um, and I had a very Catholic upbringing, but I guess as I got older, I started to see other cultures and/or other religions, and I guess, I’m now at a point where I’m not quite sure what I believe in.” —Peni.

Other participants experienced barriers to maintaining their Christian faith away from home and feeling increasingly distant. This was mainly due to irregular church attendance, brought about by barriers such as transport (including their distance from a church) and the burden of academic work.

### 3.5. Theme Four: The Value of Engagement with Services

Participants identified a wide range of university support services available to them and they felt well-informed about these services. There were three types of services that they accessed: mainstream services; Pacific specific; and those in Residential Colleges. Mainstream services shared in common with non-Pacific students included administration, academic support, health, student services, and other facilities. Two months into the academic year, many participants had already accessed academic support and Student Association facilities, especially the gymnasium/recreation centre and social involvement with clubs. Some had

accessed other general services, including the library, information technology (IT) support, and student health services. Pacific specific services included “Kick Start”; “Pacific Opportunities at Otago”; and the Pacific Islands Centre (below). Additional services were available to the two thirds of participants who stayed in Residential Colleges.

Participants had engaged with University Pacific specific support services. These included “Kick start”, a summer school preparation programme prior to starting the academic year, for first-year Pacific students. For those enrolled in the first year Health Science programme, the Va’a o Tautai—Centre for Pacific Health Pacific Opportunities and Programmes at Otago (P.O.P.O.) provided tutorials, mentoring sessions, and other assistance. Mentors for the P.O.P.O. programme were senior Pacific health professional or allied health university students. P.O.P.O. also gave students opportunities to connect with their Pacific culture and other Pacific students within the university. Pacific students not enrolled specifically in Health Sciences were able to attend many events and services run by the Pacific Islands Centre.

The availability of support services had affected participants in various ways. Those doing the “Kick start” programme had made valuable social connections prior to the academic year which, once university started, made settling in easier and allowed them time to become accustomed to the environment and to access services. Many participants who accessed Pacific specific services expressed their gratitude for the provision of cultural support as well as mentoring and academic assistance. For example, Health Science participants valued the friendship and connection with their mentors, and through these mentoring sessions, they received advice, encouragement, and guidance as they navigated their first year in higher education:

“The P.O.P.O program and the entire Pacific Health Sciences division, and the things that they’ve set up is incredible. I absolutely love it. I especially like the mentoring program. Um, so having role models, um Pacific Island role models who are in third year med [medicine] or pharmacy or dentistry, its amazing um seeing them all the time and being able to meet with them every Wednesday.” —Ieni.

#### 4. Discussion

This Talanoa-based research with Pacific first-year students identified four main themes relating to students’ well-being. These were the important roles in supporting well-being of family, cultural identity, spirituality, and support services. Family was important as the key motivation for students attending university and their inspiration for success. Culture was hugely influential on participants’ sense of identity and consequently their well-being. Most (23) of our participants were NZ-born and of mixed ethnicity and they sometimes felt unsure about where they belonged. Most grew up in Christian homes, and spirituality continued to influence students’ lives and well-being, although some students were confused and

uncertain about where they stood spiritually due to being exposed to alternative worldviews at university. During their first year at university, engagement with both Pacific specific and mainstream university services was also an important enabler of student well-being.

This Pacific-led research project provides novel insights into the lives and well-being of Pacific first-year university students, from a sample that includes all Pacific ethnicities of those who were first-year students at the University of Otago in 2019. The traditional Pacific method of Talanoa, facilitating trusting relationships between interviewers and interviewees, has yielded rich data allowing the research team to better understand Pacific students' well-being in an authentic, Pacific way. Our research provides valuable information on an area that has been under-studied yet has significant implications for improving Pacific students' academic success and consequent health and well-being outcomes.

A limitation of this study is that the first Talanoa took place before the COVID-19 pandemic, therefore these baseline findings will not reflect the impact of the pandemic on students' well-being. Our results do not address the roles of sexual behavior, gender identification and sexuality on mental health, which, in international research, have been identified as significant factors for students (Auerbach et al., 2018). Within the context of the Talanoa, and the broader contexts of Pacific culture and Christianity, accepted conventions and cultural practices influence what is appropriate and comfortable to discuss. Social response bias may have meant that participants were unlikely to disclose sensitive, personal information unless specifically asked and may have moderated their answers to please the interviewer. A further limitation of youth mental health research is that it may under-represent those who are most seriously affected by mental health issues (including young males) and who choose not to, or were unable to, take part in research. As this is a qualitative sample our findings may not be generalizable to all Pacific tertiary students. Despite these limitations, we believe our study provides an extremely rich dataset of first-hand accounts of Pacific students' first year experiences at university and how those experiences intersect and impact upon their well-being.

Our findings build on earlier work by Puna & Tiatia-Seath (2017); Sopoaga et al. (2018; 2023; 2024) and Teevale & Teu (2018). Sopoaga (2024) identified that additionally to accepted tertiary educational components (Tinto, 1975), Pacific students' success was reliant on further important enablers concerning cultural, identity, psychological, spiritual, social and physical health components. A sense of cultural connectedness was key to positive mental health and well-being for Pacific tertiary students/young people, potentially buffering against suicide (Puna & Tiatia-Seath, 2017; Sopoaga et al., 2024; Sopoaga et al., 2018). This includes the important role that retaining and revitalizing Pacific languages play in supporting Pacific students' identity (Puna & Tiatia-Seath, 2017). Our research reinforces the importance of universities providing Pacific specific support to Pacific students to help them achieve positive academic outcomes (Teevale & Teu, 2018). Our

qualitative results shed light on the findings from our quantitative research, in which we showed an association of good mental health with a sense of belonging, and conversely, an association of self-reported poorer mental health with multi-ethnicity (Sopoaga et al., 2023).

Our Talanoa unpacked the effect that being multi-ethnic has on well-being for many students (Sopoaga et al., 2023), revealing the difficulties that some experienced when they felt that they were unable to fit in either Pacific or Western worlds. Many of our participants raised in NZ or who had grown up disconnected from their culture felt this disconnection acutely, with multi-ethnic students often struggling with a clear sense of identity or sense of belonging. Other research has identified that students with multiple ethnicities may experience an identity crisis, due to needing to choose sides (Gaither, 2015). Pacific mental health research suggests that for Pacific peoples, retaining one's culture is good for mental health, and that being able to successfully navigate the "interface" of different cultures may help facilitate better academic outcomes (Manuela & Anae, 2017). Especially for those born in NZ, it can be beneficial for the mental health of people with mixed ethnicity and/or migrants to be able to walk comfortably in both worlds (Mila-Schaaf & Hudson, 2009).

Cultural identity struggles may be mitigated through a visible Pacific presence on campus. Some participants spoke of how having a tangible Pacific presence on campus, including support services, strengthened their sense of identity as Pacific. Earlier research has shown that a barrier to Pacific academic success is being unaware of support services, while an enabler is being able to ask for help and access support services (Puna & Tiatia-Seath, 2017; Teevale & Teu, 2018). On the one hand, our results are promising, indicating that early in the academic year, many participants had accessed a wide range of Pacific specific and mainstream support services. On the other hand, it shows that despite accessing support, a large percentage in our quantitative study from the overall study cohort reported poor mental health (Sopoaga et al., 2023). This suggests that there remains a big gap in support for these students to improve and sustain good mental health and well-being.

A fundamental component of cultural identity is language: it is crucial to identity and a sense of belonging, and to the growth and development of NZ's Pacific peoples (Samu et al., 2019). Without an understanding of their own language, a person's entire well-being and identity can be unstable (Samu et al., 2019). Our results reflect a trend within NZ of the loss of Pacific languages (Werry, 2020). This is a concern for Pacific identities but also because of the implications language loss has for Pacific families and community. When Pacific peoples are unable to speak their own language, this may negatively affect their connections with the older members of their communities who may not speak English (Werry, 2020).

The Pacific Fonofale Model informed our Talanoa questions, and our results align with the metaphorical elements of the "well-being fale" (house), including

the “roof” culture which (as above) provides shelter and safety through its value systems and ideas (Pulotu-Endemann, 2001; Tiatia, 2008). As the “floor” of the fale, family is the foundation upon which students’ success is built. However, there is also a flipside to the support that Pacific families provide. Pacific families may become a barrier to Pacific academic success when their expectations exert too much pressure on students (Puna & Tiatia-Seath, 2017; Teevale & Teu, 2018). This pressure can be offset by students being able to discuss concerns openly within the family, and previous research suggests that this might be more achievable within some Pacific ethnic groups compared to others (for example, it may be easier for Cook Islands Māori) (Puna & Tiatia-Seath, 2017). Our research revealed that some participants felt unable to talk about the pressures of academic life with their families. Familial obligations and expectations are a known risk factor for Pacific youth suicide and therefore our results merit further careful consideration (Teevale & Teu, 2018).

Further complexities regarding the applicability of the Fonofale Model to the interpretation of our findings are evident with the “pou” (pillar) of spirituality (Pulotu-Endemann, 2001). In our study, spirituality was a significant pou offering support in students’ lives. There is strong evidence from Pacific researchers within NZ that religion and spirituality influence the mental health and well-being of Pacific peoples, although this can be complex (Lautua & Tiatia, 2023). In NZ, spirituality and active participation within a church can be protective against Pacific youth suicide, although in the same population, a correlation between attempted youth suicide and an affiliation with an organized religion was observed (Teevale et al., 2016). It may be that active spiritual participation is the key to positive mental health, and that the identity questions raised by Pacific youth who grow up Christian, but as young adults are exposed to differing worldviews, need to be carefully considered and responded to (Ng Shiu, 2011). Sopoaga’s (2024) research reinforced that Christian faith can be an enabler for Pacific tertiary students, providing a sense of calling and thus motivation; however, spirituality could become a barrier to success when it presented challenges around staying connected to that faith or was associated with resentment. Lautua and Tiatia (2023) (who researched young Pacific women’s faith and its relation to well-being) argue for more culturally specific foci towards Pacific youth well-being, focusing on the unique aspects of faith especially for those who are multi-ethnic.

The university environment and, within that, the context of student support services was an important enabler of well-being for the participants of our study. Other studies suggest that the greater the support students receive, the better the emotional adjustment for those moving to a new place (Werry, 2020). In our study, engagement with services enabled students to feel they belonged. As above, belonging is an important correlate of well-being (Sopoaga et al., 2023). Through Pacific specific programs and services, students felt connected and were engaged academically and culturally, with many of those who otherwise felt disconnected from their Pacific culture helped to feel more connected. The Pacific specific

program and services had helped them to settle in, adjust, and create friendships.

For any tertiary student, good mental health while studying at university matters. It affects academic outcomes and, therefore, consequently other health and social outcomes: education is a social determinant of health (Patton et al., 2016). This baseline qualitative study provides evidence that certain enablers are likely to help strengthen Pacific students' well-being (and therefore their academic success) whilst studying at university: these include the provision of culturally appropriate support services which acknowledge and uphold the important roles that family, culture and spirituality play in students' lives. From our baseline Talanoa interviews during Pacific students' first few months at university, we were able to identify the areas in which Pacific students' university experience may be enhanced by the university and Pacific staff. In future qualitative publications, we will explore how these experiences and well-being changed over time.

Students' first year university experience is crucial as this sets them up for the remainder of their university experience and journey (Gosai et al., 2023). Our study results shed light on how Pacific support services can best support their Pacific students, in a way that will allow them to succeed at university and beyond. The role and influence of Pacific families upon Pacific tertiary students requires a nuanced approach. Our research supports a range of opportunities for academic institutions to better enable Pacific success in tertiary education.

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Our qualitative study provides evidence that family, cultural identity, spirituality, and student support services are all important factors contributing to Pacific students' well-being during their first year of university study. Pacific students can be supported to succeed through the provision of appropriate services including those that are Pacific specific. We recommend that universities acknowledge the importance of students' well-being and that they take active steps to address this. For Pacific students, this could include specific university acknowledgement of factors influencing Pacific well-being, such as those identified in our research, and accountability mechanisms for staff reporting on Pacific academic achievement. Support for Pacific languages within the university environment for those who wish to learn is helpful. University staff could also be intentional and active in their approaches to collaborate with the many Pacific student groups and associations at NZ universities to address Pacific health and well-being within a supportive, positive academic environment. If universities take active steps to support Pacific student well-being, this is a significant step towards reducing health and social inequities for Pacific peoples who migrate to NZ or for first generations of Pacific settlers. Success in tertiary education is crucial to breaking the cycle of poor health and well-being and social outcomes for Pacific peoples in NZ.

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## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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## Appendix

### Pacific Students' Mental Health and Wellbeing in Higher Education: Qualitative Research

Interview Schedule 1: Mid-Semester 1 at University, 2019

Preamble: Thank you again for your interest and willingness to contribute to this important work. This is the first of 4 interviews. The next one is in Semester 2, the third in 2020, and the last in 2021. It is very important you are comfortable and feel able to be involved in all 4 interviews. Can I check you are okay with this please? If for some unforeseen reason you leave university before the end of this study, is it OK if I contact you by phone at the time we are conducting the face-to-face interviews? (*record the cellphone number*)

We are seeking to understand how the University can best support the aspirations and enhance the journey of Pacific students at University. In particular, how we can best support Pacific students' mental health and wellbeing. Our conversations focus on *you, your journey at university, and exploring your mental health and wellbeing while at University*. Interviews on average will last approximately 1 hour.

There are no preferred answers in our conversation today. It is really important that you feel safe to share your honest views and feelings about what is most relevant or important for you, from your own perspective. You are welcome to provide an answer or pass (not answer) on any question. Everything you share will remain confidential to the research team.

Our conversation will be recorded, transcribed and returned to you for checking. If you wish to stop the interview at any stage, please feel free to say so. This is absolutely okay. Do you have any questions? Can I check you are comfortable with what I have discussed so far before we start?

(*Put on the recorder now...*)

Personal – the first part of our conversation is about you.

- Can you please share with me about yourself?
  - *Prompt: your background, your family, place of birth etc.?*
  - *Prompt: the things in life that matter to you the most?*
- What do you see as your main strengths?
  - *Prompt: personal attributes or values that are most important to you?*
- Can you tell me what inspires you?
  - *Prompt: what things give you inspiration or who do you get inspiration from?*
- What are the kind of things in life, that you find challenging?
  - *Prompt: things that get you down or you find difficult to deal with?*
- Can you share with me your thoughts or feelings around coming to University?
  - *Prompt: how do you feel about starting University?*
  - *Prompt: was this your decision or the decision of someone else?*

Expectations & Experiences: the next part explores your expectations and experiences of University life.

- Can you share your expectations of University prior to starting?
  - *Prompt: what did you expect it to be like?*
  - *Prompt: what were you hoping for?*
- Can you share your experiences so far?
  - *Prompt: can you share an example of an expectation vs what you experienced?*
  - *Prompt: what have you enjoyed the most? What has been the most challenging?*
  - *Prompt: what does the way forward look like for you now?*
- Can you share your experiences of the University services you have used?
  - *Prompt: this can be Pacific or mainstream academic, general or health services*

University course—this next part is about your programme of study

- Can you tell me about the course or programme you are enrolled in this year?
  - *Prompt: what career pathway are you aiming for?*
- Can you share with me how you came to make this decision?
  - *Prompt: who helped you in the process? How do you feel about this course/programme now?*
- What are the skills learnt from high school you believe will help you at University?
  - *Prompt: what helps you to study? Exercise? Time-management? Mind-maps?*
- What areas do you know about or might you require help with this year?
  - *Prompt: how about peer support groups, tutoring or mentoring support?*
- Even at this stage, have you ever contemplated giving up?
  - *Prompt—if yes, can you share with me about this? If not, what helped you to transition well to University?*

Goals and aspirations—this next part explores your goals and aspirations

- What does a successful year look like for you?
  - *Prompt: what do you hope to achieve at the end of the year?*
- What do you think you need to enable you to achieve your goal(s) this year?
  - *Prompt: what support might you need from the University (and others)?*
- What might be the challenges to achieving your goals?
  - *Prompt: what strategies do you have to address these?*

Identity this part is about you and your identity.

- Can you share with me about your cultural background/upbringing?
  - *Prompt: were you brought up in a Pacific (or ethnic specific), Palagi or mixed ethnic environment?*
- What does it mean for you to belong to, or have a Pacific identity?
  - *Prompt: this could be Samoan, Tongan, Cook Islands etc.*
- How do you feel when you are in an environment surrounded by Pacific people?
  - *Prompt: do you feel comfortable, happy or at ease?*

- How do you feel when you are in an environment surrounded by non-Pacific people?
  - *Prompt: do you feel comfortable, happy or at ease?*
- How are you fitting in into the University environment?
  - *Prompt: do you have a sense of belonging?*

Wellbeing (Health and Wellbeing)—this last part is about your health and well-being

- What does being well look like for you?
  - *Prompt: how do you know that you are well? How do you know when you are not?*
  - *Prompt: use the Fonofale model of health*
  - *Culture—Can you share with me how connected you are feeling to your culture(s) now that you have moved down here?*
  - *Family (relationships)—How are your relationships with your family at the moment? How is your family doing? What is it like being away from them?*
  - *Spiritual (faith, relationship with God)—How would you describe your sense of spirituality? How important is this aspect of your life? Has your spirituality/faith changed in any way since coming to Otago?*
  - *Physical—How has your physical health been since coming to Otago? Any illness? What has the quantity and quality of your sleep been like since you have been here? How has your appetite been? What have your eating habits been like? How much exercise do you fit in since coming to Dunedin?*
  - *Mental (stress, worry)—What happens for you when you get stressed? What sort of things do you find stressful? Can you tell me about the last time you felt stressed?*
  - *Emotional (feeling low, depressed, happy etc.)—What has your mood been like since you have come to Otago? What type of things seem to affect your mood (both positively and negatively)?*
  - *Environment—How comfortable are you in the campus environment? How is your accommodation working out for you? How safe do you feel? How comfortable do you feel? How are you finding the spaces available for studying, compared to at home? How have you found the adjustment to the climate? How are you finding living in the city of Dunedin?*
  - *Time—How is your time management currently working for you? How do you feel you have changed since this time a year ago? (+ any relevant issues of the specific time for Pacific people)*
  - *Context—How do you feel about being a Pacific Islander and fitting in to the university context?*
- What is your plan for maintaining wellness this year?
  - *Prompt: what is important to you for maintaining well-being or wellness at University?*
  - *Prompt: what role can “others” play to help you maintain wellness?... who are the “others”?*

- *Prompt: are you doing anything currently that might affect your health? (for e.g., OH, smoking, drugs etc.)*
- What does being mentally well look like for you?
  - *Prompt: How do you know that you are mentally well? How do you know when you are not?*
  - *Prompt: Can you share any thoughts or concerns (if any) you might have about maintaining wellness as you start University?*
- What is your experience of mental health difficulties or mental illness? (either personally or with other people that you have known)?
  - *Prompt: What was that like?*
  - *Prompt: How do you view mental health?*
  - *Prompt: How do you view mental illness? What do you think is your wider family's view of mental illness?*
- What impact/effect did the Christchurch tragedy have on you personally?
- Who would you normally seek help from first, if you are finding things difficult or become stressed?
  - *Prompt: would this be your friends or family etc.*
  - *Prompt: have you ever sought help from a professional for a mental health or personal issue? Was this helpful? Can you share why or why not?*
- What means do you use most frequently to stay connected to your friends and family?
  - *Prompt: social media, email, phone etc.*

Do you have any other thoughts or things you wish to share that you consider important for you this year, we have not yet discussed?

Thank you very much for your time. Our interview will be typed and available for you to check within three weeks. Would you like a hard copy or emailed? Please check and make any changes you would like and return to us within 2 weeks.