

Successful First-Year Pacific University Students in New Zealand: What Can We Learn from Their Journey?

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Abstract

There is increasing interest in factors that support better educational outcomes for minority and underrepresented groups in the tertiary environment. Pacific peoples are a minority group which makes up approximately nine percent of the total New Zealand population. It is a youthful and fast-growing population and is underrepresented in higher education degrees and health professional programmes. There is a small and growing body of literature which focuses on the success of Pacific students in higher education in New Zealand. There is, however, very little research on Pacific students in their first year of higher education. The first year in the tertiary environment is considered to be very important for students. Research shows that tertiary students who completed their first year in higher education successfully were more likely to progress to complete their qualifications. This research focuses on what we can learn from Pacific students who successfully completed their first year in higher education. We identified six factors that were commonly shared among these students. These were academic self-efficacy, a solution-focused approach, strong networks and effective engagement, academic help-seeking behaviour, enjoyment of the journey, and a balanced approach. These areas can be further tested in future research to explore if they are independent of each other, or whether a combination of these factors are directly linked to improved academic outcomes. Our findings may provide helpful areas for tertiary institutions to consider to further support minority or underrepresented groups.

Keywords

Pacific, First-Year University Students, New Zealand, Academic Success, Longitudinal Qualitative Research

1. Introduction

Higher education achievements can contribute to better employment opportunities (Harvey, 2000). Education therefore influences the socio-economic determinants of health, general well-being, and greater job satisfaction (Ali, 2024). Better education and employment opportunities were key reasons for Pacific peoples migrating to New Zealand in increasing numbers over the past 70 years (Sin & Ormsby, 2019). Pacific peoples are those from Pacific Island nations and territories spread across the Pacific Ocean. During the economic boom of the 1950s and 1960s, New Zealand actively recruited a Pacific labour workforce from these islands to support its growing industries (Bedford & Gibson, 1986; Gibson, 1983). Immigration laws were relaxed, allowing those on a visitors' visa to work, including those who overstayed their visa permits. In the 1970s and 1980s, during the global financial crisis, the New Zealand government utilised extreme measures to forcibly remove Pacific Islanders who were over-stayers, in what was known as the Dawn Raids (Aae, 2012). When it suited New Zealand to have cheap labour for economic gains, Pacific peoples were welcomed. However, when they were no longer of benefit to New Zealand, Pacific peoples were discriminated against through media campaigns and blamed for other New Zealanders losing their jobs (Aae, 2012; Isola Productions, 2015). In 2021, a formal apology was extended from the Prime Minister of New Zealand, Hon. Jacinda Ardern, to Pacific peoples for the injustices to Pacific peoples during this period (New Zealand Government, 2021).

Despite this unfortunate history, many Pacific peoples have since settled in New Zealand, making up approximately 9% of the total population (Ministry of Health, 2025a). It is a diverse and fast-growing population, with the largest Pacific ethnic groups originating from Samoa (48.1%), Tonga (22.1%), Cook Islands (21.3%), Niue (7.9%), Fiji (5.7%), and Tokelau (2.2%). Pacific peoples in New Zealand are a youthful population, with 50% aged 25 years or younger and a median age of 24.9 years. By 2043, approximately 11.2% of the total New Zealand population is estimated to identify with at least one Pacific ethnic group. The largest ethnic groups in New Zealand are the New Zealand European (67.8%), Māori (17.8%), and Asian (17.3%) populations. Despite the aspirations for better education and employment opportunities, Pacific peoples are disproportionately represented in adverse health, social, economic, and education outcomes. Māori, the indigenous people of New Zealand, share similar outcomes to Pacific peoples (Reid et al., 2022; Walsh & Grey, 2019).

When compared to other ethnic groups, Māori and Pacific students were less likely to either attend or transition well into university (Loader & Dalgety, 2008; McKinley & Madjar, 2014). More recent data shows that of all domestic students who graduated with a qualification, approximately 8.3% identified with a Pacific ethnicity (Ministry of Health, 2025b; Statistics New Zealand, 2024). Pacific students were under-represented amongst those who graduated with higher degrees, such as master's (5.5%) and doctoral degrees (4.3%), and over-represented in

lower-level qualifications like certificate levels 1 - 4 (11.4%). Pacific peoples participated in tertiary education at approximately the same rate as the general population in 2023, with an age-standardised participation rate of 11.1%. However, only 7.3% of Pacific peoples aged 15 years or older held a bachelor's degree, which was approximately half compared to Europeans (13.9%) and less than one-third compared to Asians (25.1%).

Higher education researchers have identified several areas that can influence tertiary student success and their retention. Tinto's longitudinal model of institutional departure Tinto (1975) was the first model that explored factors that had an impact on student retention in higher education. It outlined the influence of areas such as family background, skills and abilities, and prior schooling, as well as transition engagement, including the role of tertiary institutions. The impact of family background is well documented; for example, students with parents who had higher academic qualifications were less likely to depart university without achieving their goals (Jaffe & Adams, 1970; Spady, 1970), while those from lower socio-economic backgrounds experienced difficulties transitioning well into the tertiary environment (Astin, 1964; Sewell & Shah, 1967). Receiving the required preparation prior to entering tertiary studies is helpful. What schools can offer is important in the academic preparedness of students for tertiary studies (Davis, 1966; Nelson, 1972). Some schools may not offer the specific subjects that are required to prepare students for a specific course they wish to take. Helpful school career advice can guide students and their families, so they make well-informed choices.

Individual attributes such as skills and abilities are also important. Students with less developed skills for problem solving in higher education studies were more likely to drop out (Blanchfield, 1971; Sterne, 2006). Academic self-efficacy is a student's self-belief that they can achieve their goals. High academic self-efficacy supported students' adjustment and transition phase and contributed to educational achievement in higher education (Chemers et al., 2001). Support for individuals' intellectual development is important for engagement and success in higher education. A range of academic strategies can be helpful to support diverse student learning needs, and to assist their transition to higher education. These can include enhancing effective learning and study strategies (Greaves & Mortimer, 2004), discipline-based study skills (Durkin & Main, 2002), the effective use of available resources such as the library and other support strategies (Brazier & Conroy, 1996; Cuseo, 2012).

Robust systems and processes to support students once enrolled in the tertiary environment assist their transition. These include the availability of residential accommodation and associated support, which contribute to student success and a positive academic experience (Pike, 1999). Excellent residential accommodation can determine students' choices of where they study (Astin, 1973; Blimling, 1988; Blimling, 1989). Other helpful processes include staff support for students' adjustment to the social systems of a new tertiary environment, identified by medical

students as the most important factor in their transition to tertiary study (Dennis, 2000). This can be complemented by relationships with helpful peers (Davis et al., 2022). Research has also shown that students who completed their first year in higher education successfully were more likely to progress to complete their tertiary studies (Clark et al., 2008). There are now increasing efforts to support the retention and success of students in their first year in tertiary studies (García-Ros et al., 2019; Sophia et al., 2015). Studies into the expectations and experiences in their first year of tertiary studies have identified the importance of students' perspectives during this transition period (Booth, 1997; Geall, 2000).

There is a small but increasing body of knowledge on factors that support the retention and success of Pacific students; however, there has been less focus specifically on their first year in higher education (Colombo et al., 2023; Sopoaga & van der Meer, 2012; Sopoaga et al., 2024a; Waiari et al., 2021). Previous research explored the level of preparedness of Pacific students for tertiary studies (Sopoaga et al., 2013). It found poorer academic preparedness of Pacific students compared to non-Pacific students from high school, which had an impact on their performance in their first year at university. Mental health and well-being concerns were also identified for Pacific students in their first year in tertiary studies (Sopoaga et al., 2023; Sopoaga et al., 2018; Sopoaga et al., 2024b). The roles of spirituality, family, culture, and support services were important to the well-being of Pacific students in the first year (Sopoaga et al., 2024b). Good well-being contributes to supporting students' achievement of academic success.

The University of Otago is one of the largest providers of health professional training in New Zealand, the only institution that offers training in dentistry, and currently, one of two medical schools in the country. It therefore attracts many first-year students wishing to train in a health professional programme. The first-year health sciences' academic results determine entry to highly competitive health professional programmes. Students have to pass all seven papers with a minimum academic requirement to be eligible to be considered (University of Otago, 2025). The first year in health sciences is considered to be one of the most challenging first-year programmes offered at the University. Feedback from first-year health sciences students at the University found the year to be competitive and overwhelming as they transitioned into the new learning environment (Jameson & Smith, 2011).

A doctoral research study was undertaken to explore enablers and barriers for Pacific first-year students in Health Sciences at the University of Otago (Sopoaga, 2021). Folauga is an educational model developed through this research (Sopoaga et al., 2024a) and was adapted from Tinto's model (Tinto, 1975) specifically for Pacific students. It supported all the areas identified by Tinto as important for the success and retention of students in higher education. The Folauga model, however, highlighted additional areas which were important for the success of Pacific students in higher education. These were culture, identity, health, and well-being. Health and well-being included the physical, mental, social, and spiritual aspects

of well-being. Further data from this research are presented in this paper. We have taken a strengths-based approach, focusing specifically on Pacific students who were successful in this first year, exploring what we can learn from their journey. Success was defined as students passing all first-year papers and being offered a place in highly competitive health professional programmes.

2. Method

A qualitative research methodology was used for the research. To support engagement with Pacific participants, cultural research processes were utilised. The Kakala methodology (Thaman, 1992) and Talanoa method (Vaiotei, 2006) are approaches that have been utilised widely for Pacific research in New Zealand.

2.1. Eligibility and Recruitment Process

Pacific students who were enrolled in the first year in health sciences in 2015 at the University were eligible to participate. The University's Pacific Islands and Student Support Unit assisted in the recruitment of participants for this research. Of the 108 students from the eligible cohort, twenty were randomly selected, stratified by ethnicity and gender, to participate in the study. Fifteen students agreed to participate and were included in the study. Some who were invited declined participation, and further students were invited until the total number of 20 required was obtained. Information sheets were provided and consent forms obtained from participants before the research commenced. Three interviews with each participant were organised to explore students' perspectives and experiences during the year. The first interview was completed during the University orientation period, the second six weeks into the first semester, and the final interview during the second semester. This allowed longitudinal follow-up and exploration about what we can learn from participants' experiences during the year. Of the 60 possible interviews, 59 were able to be completed. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Otago Ethics Committee.

2.2. Cultural Research Method and Methodology

To further support engagement with Pacific participants, cultural research processes were utilised. The Kakala methodology (Thaman, 1992) and the Talanoa method (Vaiotei, 2006) are approaches that have been utilised widely for Pacific research in New Zealand.

The Talanoa method was used for data collection. Talanoa is a word common among many Pacific languages and simply means to have a conversation (Vaiotei, 2006). Pacific communities have used this practice to pass down traditional knowledge over the years. The setting and preparation of the venue were undertaken to ensure everyone involved in the Talanoa felt comfortable. The processes that were followed were contextualised to suit the occasion. For example, when undertaking Talanoa with community elders, there are often expectations for prayers at the beginning and the end of a session. The interviewer, who was of

Pacific descent, ensured that all processes undertaken met the expectations of each participant. Participants' time and valuable contributions were acknowledged at the end of each interview, including the offer of a small gift. Interviews were recorded and participants were offered their transcripts to keep as a record of their perspectives and personal development, which many found valuable. Conversations were guided by semi-structured questions, starting with general conversations to develop connectedness before the official data collection commenced. Developing confidence and trust early in the process was important. With subsequent interviews, participants felt more at ease and reported that they looked forward to the next interview because the engagement supported their personal growth through self-reflection.

The Kakala is a metaphorical research framework based on the Tongan processes for garland-making (Kalavite, 2014). The creation of flower garlands is a tradition practised across many Pacific countries. The Kakala in Tonga, lei in Hawaii, 'ei in the Cook Islands, or ula in Samoa are created for specific purposes such as welcoming guests or special celebrations. The Kakala research methodology has three components: Toli, Tui, and Luva. Toli refers to the process utilised for gathering and selecting flowers. Determining the type of flowers and how these are prepared and utilised ensures the garland is suitable and meets the expectations for the occasion. This phase of the research is critical to the success of the research. It includes early preparation, setting the context, creating a comfortable, welcoming environment, connecting and establishing relationships, and the consultation phase. This phase also includes the set-up of cultural or other relevant advisory groups. Accordingly, this research received advice from the Division of Health Sciences Pacific Advisory Group and Pacific health experts, who were consulted throughout the research. Toli and Talanoa have similar approaches and are involved in this early phase for data collection. Following data collection, the interviews were transcribed, and each participant was given a unique identifier to maintain their anonymity. Transcribed interviews were provided to participants to check for accuracy before uploading into NVivo for data management and analysis.

Tui refers to the making of the garland from the flowers gathered. The flowers are carefully selected to ensure that the type and shape fit well together to create the final product to be presented. The flowers collected that did not have the correct shape or size were removed. The process for selection and removal of flowers was undertaken respectfully, acknowledging that all information gathered was gifted for the research. This stage includes data checking of initial analyses and refining through further analyses of preliminary results. Incomplete data or data that were not aligned with the aims of the research were removed. An inductive analytical approach was utilised to examine data across the three interview periods, which identified broad areas with common ideas. These areas were further analysed to identify key emerging themes across the three interview periods. The analytical approach is located epistemologically within a constructivist/interpre-

tive paradigm.

Luva is the final stage of the Kakala methodology and involves the completion and presentation or the gifting of the Kakala for its intended purpose. Garlands are gifted to special guests or people who are being acknowledged or honoured for specific purposes. The value of the Kakala is determined by the skill of the designer. Its beauty is reflected through the care undertaken at all stages of the garland-making process. In this context, the usefulness of research outcomes is dependent on the skill of the researcher during the data collection phase, the weaving together of information during analysis, and progressing to the final stage, which includes the presentation of outcomes to relevant audiences.

3. Results

3.1. Overview of the Participants

Of the 20 participants, most were aged between 19 and 20 years, with equal representation of those who identified either as male or female. There were nine Pacific ethnic groups represented, and 11 identified with one Pacific ethnicity. Most (17) stayed in a residential college (see [Table 1](#)).

Table 1. Description of study participants.

Study participants	Age	Gender	Ethnic affiliation	Accommodation type
Participant 1	19	F	Cook Island Māori; New Zealand European/Pākehā	Residential College
Participant 2	19	F	Samoa; New Zealand European/Pākehā	Residential College
Participant 3	19	M	Fijian	Residential College
Participant 4	20	M	Tongan	Residential College
Participant 5	19	F	Samoa; Tokelauan; New Zealand European/Pākehā	Residential College
Participant 6	19	M	Tongan; Samoa; New Zealand European/Pākehā	Residential College
Participant 7	19	M	Tuvalu	Residential College
Participant 8	18	F	Samoa; New Zealand European/Pākehā	Residential College
Participant 9	>25	M	Samoa	Flat
Participant 10	20	F	Tongan	Residential College
Participant 11	19	M	Samoa; New Zealand European/Pākehā; Other	Residential College
Participant 12	19	F	Fijian	Residential College
Participant 13	19	F	Fijian	Flat

Continued

Participant 14	20	F	Samoan	Flat
Participant 15	19	M	Samoan	Residential College
Participant 16	19	F	Niuean; Samoan; New Zealand European/Pākehā;	Residential College
Participant 17	18	M	Solomon Island/New Zealand European/Pākehā	Residential College
Participant 18	18	F	Samoan, New Zealand European/Pākehā	Residential College
Participant 19	19	M	Fijian	Residential College
Participant 20	19	M	Fijian	Residential College

Of all participants, nine (45%) passed all seven papers successfully in 2025 and at a level where they were eligible for entry into competitive health professional programmes in 2026. One student passed all papers but not at the level required for entry into health professional programmes. Of the nine eligible for competitive entry, some received multiple offers from different programmes. Most accepted offers for entry into medicine and a few into pharmacy programmes. Ten students did not pass all seven papers, which was the minimum requirement for consideration for entry to health professional programmes. Of the 11 students who were not eligible for entry into a health professional programme, eight re-enrolled in other degrees and three withdrew from the University. Of those who withdrew, one took a year off before re-enrolling at a different university, another returned to previous employment, and the third found part-time employment while she reconsidered her options.

Analysis of the results identified six themes/areas most shared among the nine participants who had achieved success in their first year of tertiary studies. These themes were academic self-efficacy, a solution-focused approach, strong networks and effective engagement, academic help-seeking behaviour, enjoyment of the journey, and a balanced approach.

3.2. Academic Self-Efficacy

Participants expressed self-confidence in their ability to move into this new stage of their development and to navigate well any challenges they may encounter in the tertiary environment. This appeared to have been nurtured through personal development from previous experiences. There was satisfaction in addressing challenges and overcoming them, and this contributed further to their growth and self-belief. Additionally, there was openness to engage in the new learning environment with peers, and they had expectations from the learning environment and of themselves to achieve their goals:

“...yeah, I’m feeling confident to be here...I came here...was full of confidence...to know other people as well doing the same course, and more im-

portantly what it's going to be like, like for the year so like be prepared for it... em, I'm pretty confident... all I have to do is work hard, try to do the best that I can do... yeah, I am ready for it" (P15 Interview 1)

"Self-belief, definitely, when you hit something that is challenging... being able to look back on those things and see that... yeah, I made it through that, I can do this sort of stuff... and every past experience is, like, a lesson for the future kind of thing... it's been quite good in the sense that anything that I've come across that... found difficult or challenging... um, nowadays I look back at the same thing, and, like... ah, yeah, that's easy, I can do that" (P8 Interview 3)

Over the year, one participant's academic self-efficacy was based on confidence in his own abilities and helpful approaches developed over time. He also had the ability to adjust or adapt his approach during the year to ensure better alignment and preparedness for academic progress. While he had confidence in his own abilities, there were additional factors external to personal abilities that he felt assisted him:

"Definitely the work ethic, the ability to just get down and do the hard yards and grind it out, um, the ability to sort of know what's happening in and around you, paying attention in the lectures and the tutorials when they are explaining all the little details and just, yeah... getting stuck into it... and having no, um, lack of confidence. Just backing myself to, yeah, do the best I can" (P19 Interview 1)

"I think I'm pretty much where I ought to be, given some of the new stuff I had to learn. Maybe I didn't quite understand but knew the basic concepts of it... a little bit more time and a little bit more preparation... I'll be spot on for when the final exams come" (P19 Interview 2)

"I just feel really confident in the work that I put into it, like all four. I just felt really confident, not only in myself but also that... I was blessed" (P19 Interview 3)

3.3. Solution-Focused Approach and Growth Mindset

One of the participants who achieved the highest marks overall at the end of the year initially had anxiety about whether she would perform well at the tertiary level. She identified the areas of concern that she needed to improve on from previous experiences and developed solutions for addressing these. As she progressed through the year, she applied these approaches, which enabled her to achieve the outcomes she hoped for. Through this experience, she developed confidence in her own abilities and academic development, including insight about the requirements for success at the tertiary level:

"I've developed a bit of a bad habit... I'll know everything and then get in there and just freak out a bit and em... I'm scared of that. I'm definitely scared of that... but I want to kind of overcome it and make sure I know everything so... that can't happen" (P1 Interview 1)

"I was very nervous, super nervous before the test, but I knew that I had to somehow not get too nervous so I could think in the exam... I studied heaps for

HUBS and it was nice that, putting in all that study, actually paid off...” (P1 Interview 2)

“...the cliché thing ‘all you can do is your best,’ but I kind of realized that that’s true... like in a way, nothing is actually that hard, it’s just a lot... a lot of time needs to go into memorising it all and figuring out how to do it, so it’s definitely... much more about the time you put in... don’t freak out if you are not understanding it... because I think everyone probably feels like that... at first I thought it was just me... just got to like trust that if you put in the effort you will understand it eventually...” (P1 Interview 3)

Another participant approached life’s circumstances by positioning situations in a positive light. When a situation emerged that could have been perceived as a problem, she repositioned it as a stepping stone towards a better outcome. She did not allow challenges or perceived challenges, whether they were environmental or personal circumstances, to prevent her from achieving her goals:

“Well, you know, the way I think of it, you have to turn every negative into a positive. Instead of thinking you’ve left family... you have to think that when I go back to my family, they are going to be proud of me... you have to be really positive.” (P13 Interview 1)

“You can work around anything that comes your way. For example, I couldn’t study at home, so I ended up studying in the foyer of ...St Davids [lecture theatre complex] where the black sofas are... so I ended up studying there in the evenings, and it was really nice...” (P13 Interview 2)

“When I was coming back in the second semester, I did feel like...oh my God I’m going to put myself through all this again. Like all the sleepless nights, all the challenges (chuckle), it was just like...whoa, you must be stupid to do all this again...but then you remind yourself that...hey, this is not what you are putting yourself through...you know there’s a...better thing after this...” (P13 Interview 3)

3.4. Strong Networks and Effective Engagement

Participants who achieved well developed a strong network of support around them early on. They had existing support from family, which they expanded to include other support networks in the tertiary environment. Early engagement with staff, mentors, and their peers was helpful. In this new learning environment, they felt able to reach out for support, whether it was academic or social engagement, developing a strong level of connectedness and sense of belonging while they transitioned into the new learning environment.

“I think the Early Orientation Programme was good in the sense that we got to know staff here, so we can approach them. We got to bond with our mentors, so it made it easier. Like, they’re not just a group of senior students that you can talk to; it’s like they become... you become closer, it’s just easier to approach them...” (P12 Interview 2)

“There’s always times where I’ll be studying ...and I can’t get a concept and I’ll

just get frustrated, but then you just look to one of your friends or someone, they'll help you through it and there's always support around you.” (P8 Interview 2)

“I think all the support around me, like my family, my friends, and my PIRSSU here, and, um, all the mentors and staff have been really caring, and I've never felt I was by myself here, which has been so nice...yeah.” (P2 Interview 2)

3.5. Academic Help-Seeking Behavior

Six weeks into the first semester, participants were beginning to identify areas of learning they felt comfortable with and areas where they needed help. To obtain the help they needed, they felt it was necessary to engage with others and to be proactive in reaching out to those with the relevant expertise for assistance. There was no embarrassment or fear in reaching out for support, once they identified the specific areas in which they needed help:

“So it's just good to talk to people, to reach out, good to, like, you know...to know anything, it's always good to ask. It's the biggest thing I like...because if you don't ask, you kind of just sit there...” (P13 Interview 2)

“...so I like to go back and make my notes or do my readings...I would know what I know and what I don't know...then I can go ask people or email them or...ask my tutors” (P 12 Interview 2)

“...asking the tutors about something I wasn't sure of...but yeah...I'll ask the question, not afraid to, yeah.” (P19 Interview 2)

3.6. Enjoyment of the Journey

Participants expressed how tough and challenging the transition period was to tertiary education; however, there was enjoyment in the process of learning and engagement throughout the first-year journey. Participants had a thirst for new knowledge. There was a real sense of achievement and confidence in the realisation of their own abilities and skills, and they felt good being immersed and embedded in the learning processes in higher education:

“I'm like more capable than I thought I was, I think. I think that's what Uni showed me, that I've done this, and I've survived, and I'm like enjoying it” (P 1 Interview 1)

“I really enjoy the labs because I'm kind of a hands-on learner, so being able to see something that we've learned in a lecture applied to what we do in the lab... I love being able to just learn new things and concepts and ideas... at university there's something new every single lecture and you're just absorbing information all the time and, um, I really enjoy that” (P 8 Interview 2)

“Just meeting new people and, um, getting to experience new things, and, yeah, just the academic journey in itself. It's a challenge, but it's a challenge that I am totally engaged in, which is all good” (P 9 Interview 3)

3.7. Balanced Approach

There was recognition of the need for a balanced approach during the year, and

participants were able to put in place plans to enable them to achieve this balance. Good discipline was required with a structured approach to organising time, where there was designated time for academic studies as well as for maintaining health and well-being. There was recognition of the importance of their physical, mental, social, and spiritual well-being in maintaining this balance and that these contributed to achieving their goals:

“So there are always moments, um, when you just think ... what am I doing here? Like, this is too much, this is crazy! ... um, but you always get through them and you always find a way to, um, either calm yourself down and just take a step back or just get your head around it ... I know where my limits are, kind of thing ... so being able to limit myself and know I have this to do, like my studies are my first priority and sports come after ... and so being able to balance, um ...” (P 8 interview 3)

“I’m completely into the routine of the whole thing, like em, I’m completely comfortable, and... friends have been a massive part of the journey, and I’ve got lots of great friends. I’ve just signed a flat, actually, for next year, which is exciting!” (P1 Interview 3)

“Ah, my faith was a big thing getting me through first semester. I just, um... just really felt like it was a stronghold for me, just being able to rely on my faith and just knowing that, deep down, I would get through” (P 19 Interview 3)

4. Discussion

This paper examines the factors that supported the successful transition of Pacific students in their first year in health sciences, and who were accepted into a health professional programme at the University. Of the 20 Pacific first-year participants who were interested in a health professional career, nine (45%) achieved success. There were six identified areas that were common among the students who achieved their goals at the end of the academic year. These areas were academic self-efficacy, a solution-focused approach, strong networks and effective engagement, proactive help-seeking behaviour, enjoyment of the journey, and a balanced approach.

Pacific students are under-represented in all health professional programmes. Several efforts have been made to increase the representation of Pacific and Māori (Indigenous) students in health professional programmes. This has had some success in increasing the representation of Pacific and Māori students studying health sciences at the University (Crampton et al., 2012; Crampton et al., 2018).

Academic self-efficacy is a student’s belief that they can achieve a specific academic goal. The idea of self-efficacy was described by Bandura as “the belief in one’s capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to produce given attainments” (Bandura, 2001). There is established evidence about the strong relationship between academic self-efficacy and academic achievement or performance (Chemers et al., 2001). Our results reinforce the importance of academic self-efficacy to academic achievement. For example, there was a level of

self-belief that students had what it takes to succeed at this level. Others have also investigated the intersection of how academic engagement and academic achievement are related, suggesting that there is a mediating role of academic engagement which links academic self-efficacy to academic achievement (Meng & Zhang, 2023). The evaluation of Pacific first-year students' engagement with academic support offered between 2014 and 2024 suggested that students who engaged with the tutorial programmes were more likely to pass compared with students who did not engage (POPO Research Team, 2025). While academic self-efficacy skills are likely to have been acquired prior to entering higher education, there are opportunities to further support first-year students to develop and enhance academic self-efficacy skills and encourage engagement in academic activities at university.

Our study showed that those who transitioned well and achieved their academic goals approached challenges with a solution-focused approach and a positive or growth mindset. They identified early the gaps in their knowledge or skill set and developed helpful approaches to addressing these. Similarly, research into factors that enabled high-achieving students to succeed has identified having a strong internal locus of control as important (Micomonaco & Espinoza, 2022). In our study, students felt empowered to achieve through their internal locus of control and were able to change their approach and behaviours to achieve their academic goals. Other researchers have explored the concept of hope as a predictor of academic success (Rand et al., 2020). Hope is defined as “the perceived capability to derive pathways to desired goals and motivate oneself via agency thinking to use those pathways (Snyder, 1995: p. 355). “Agency refers to a sense of successful determination in meeting goals in the past, present, and future.” (Snyder et al., 1991: p. 570) These findings also resonated with the approaches our participants had to challenges and situations they encountered during the year.

Research shows that students who successfully completed their first year in higher education were more likely to progress to complete their qualifications (Clark et al., 2008). Adjustment to the social system of a new environment can be overwhelming. The development of strong networks between students and their peers, as well as staff, and maintaining strong relationships with students' families are important to the success of students in higher education (Dennis, 2000; Quintrell & Westwood, 1994). Our research supported the importance of support networks from families, peers, and staff for students, especially in the first year, when for many this was the first time they were living away from their families, support networks, and familiar surroundings.

This uncertain period of students transitioning to a new, unfamiliar tertiary environment may be overcome by adaptation (Bean & Eaton, 2001). In a study that focused on the experience of overachievers, participants reported not being afraid of trying new strategies and reaching out for help where needed (Micomonaco & Espinoza, 2022). The adoption of new strategies or coping behaviours to enable students to transition well into a new environment has been referred to as adap-

tation (Bean & Eaton, 2001). Research has found that academic help-seeking behaviour has a positive and significant correlation to academic achievement (Astatke, 2019). In our study, participants felt it was important to reach out for support when needed, and had no reservations about doing so. In doing so, they did preliminary work to seek to understand the subjects' content. Where they recognised areas where they had gaps in their knowledge, they reached out for support. To further support help-seeking behaviour, some studies have suggested that this should not rely solely on students to seek support, but that institutions need to consider how to create a supportive environment to ensure students are comfortable to seek help when needed (Fong et al., 2023).

Researchers have investigated the relationship between positive emotions in the learning environment and academic achievement (Villavicencio & Bernardo, 2013). Students who experienced positive emotions during the learning process were more likely to have higher academic achievement. Others have proposed that positive emotions in the academic environment support their motivation to utilise a variety of strategies to achieve their goals (Pekrun et al., 2002). Self-regulation is defined as self-generated thoughts, feelings, and actions that are planned and systematically adapted as needed to affect one's learning and motivation (Schunk & Ertmer, 2000). Self-regulation is similar to the idea of locus of control mentioned earlier (Micomonaco & Espinoza, 2022). Positive emotions are suggested to enhance self-regulation, which contributes to better student achievement (Bernardo et al., 2009). Participants in our study shared about enjoyment of their academic journey despite encountering challenges. This enjoyment is likely to encourage them to be more motivated and engaged with their learning. High engagement supports successful outcomes in the learning environment (Krause & Coates, 2008; Kuh, 2003).

Participants referred to the need for a balanced approach, which included looking after their physical, mental, social, and spiritual well-being. The Folauga model (Sopoaga et al., 2024a), an adaptation of Tinto's longitudinal model of institutional departure (Tinto, 1975), identified an additional number of factors that were important for the success of Pacific students in higher education. These were related to their culture, identity, health, and well-being. Health and well-being were viewed in a holistic way and included their physical, mental, social, and spiritual well-being. Studies have investigated the importance of balancing academic studies and personal life (Rožman et al., 2025). This included the importance of time management (Abdulrahman, 2022). Exercise has been shown to reduce stress, enhancing academic success (Matian et al., 2023). Social integration is an important component of students' participation and retention in higher education (Tinto, 1975, 1993). Being able to connect and make friends, especially in the first year, supports success. Spiritual well-being is important for Pacific students (Ng Shiu, 2011). For many participants in our study, their personal faith provided the balance they needed, especially in times of uncertainty and feeling homesick.

Tinto's retention theory and longitudinal model of institutional departure (Tinto, 1975) supported the importance of students' academic skills and abilities,

prior schooling preparation, and intentions when they enter higher education. Our research similarly found that academic self-efficacy, participants' ability to be solution-focused, and proactive help-seeking behaviour were helpful. Tinto also highlighted the importance of faculty and peer interactions as well as social integration in students' success. Similarly, our research found that students who were successful developed strong networks early within the tertiary environment and maintained effective engagement both internal and external to the tertiary environment.

Our research has highlighted six areas most shared among Pacific students who achieved success in their first year at university. Further research utilising quantitative methods is required to test the association between these areas and successful academic outcomes in different tertiary student populations and potential causal mechanisms. Our research takes a strengths-based approach and highlighted areas to consider for the improvement of outcomes for Pacific students in the tertiary environment. Identifying areas that support positive outcomes can assist institutions in growing success among their Pacific student populations.

5. Strengths and Limitations

Of the 60 possible interviews scheduled, 59 were able to be completed, and this is an excellent response rate. These data provided rich insight into the worldview and depth of experiences of students at three different time points during this transition period. This approach enabled us to explore any changes over time in students' engagement and experiences in their first year in higher education.

The generalisability of the findings to other institutions is limited. The 20 participants were from only one institution. It is possible that the students who agreed to be part of this study may have responded differently from those who did not accept the invitation to be involved. It is possible, for example, that those who did not agree to participate may also have been successful in this first year, with different themes from the ones already identified.

Respect is an important value in Pacific communities, particularly for elders. Some students may have felt obliged to participate out of respect, as the interviewer was a senior Pacific researcher. Additionally, they may have answered questions in a socially desirable way; therefore, their own perspectives may not have been accurately recorded.

6. Conclusion

Pacific peoples are a migrant minority and a fast-growing young population in New Zealand. While their hopes and aspirations for better educational outcomes have not been realised for many, the six areas highlighted can assist efforts by educational institutions in New Zealand to further support their progress and success. The common areas identified among these successful students may provide helpful areas to consider for other tertiary institutions with minority or under-represented groups.

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Conflicts of Interest

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

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