Empowering student leaders to nurture the first year experience through cross-cultural diversity. A Practice Report
Nāu te raurau, Nāku te raurau, ka ora ai te iwi.

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Te Whare Wānanga o te Upoku o te Ika a Maui

Abstract

Victoria University offers a number of peer-support and mentoring programs for first-year students, including Te Pūtahi Atawahi (mentoring and holistic support for Māori and Pasifika students), PASS (Peer Assisted Study Support) and Campus Coaches (Orientation Week guides). In the past, despite having similar goals of providing peer-support to foster a sense of community, such programs have operated in isolation. However, a recent initiative has seen the development of a core leadership training module, jointly designed and delivered by staff from Te Pūtahi Atawhai and Student Learning Support. Seeking to equip student-leaders with an understanding of some of the holistic Māori values, Kotahitanga (unity), Ako (teaching and learning), Manaakitanga (empathy/hospitality), Whakamana (respect), Whakanui (acknowledging success), Whakawhanaungatanga (building strong networks) and Rangatiratanga (ability to bring groups together/Self-direction), this core training offers the potential to strengthen Treaty of Waitangi relationships and nurture inter-cultural awareness, developing a pan-university sense of belongingness in the process.

Environmental context: Targeted peer support for individual groups

Victoria University of Wellington (VUW) in New Zealand has a clear commitment to Māori as *tangata whenua* and this is reflected in the Treaty of Waitangi (TOW) Statute that facilitates this relationship. The TOW principles have been adopted and recognised in legislation by the Crown: *Kawangatanga* (governance), *Rangatiratanga* (self-management), Equality and reasonable cooperation and redress (Department of Justice, 1989). The Victoria University TOW Statute recognises the university's obligations to the Treaty of Waitangi. This statute guides the organisational operation of the university and its scope stretches to encompass students, staff and council members at VUW (Victoria University Governance Policy Group, 2000).

Since the issuing of new directives from the Tertiary Education Commission (2010-2015) identifying the need to increase Māori and Pasifika participation, retention and achievement rates, creating an inclusive teaching and learning environment that is culturally safe is of the upmost importance (Ministry of Education, 2010). VUW has acknowledged the necessity of fostering Treaty relationships pan-university (Boumelha, 2009). Even though this statute has been in place since 2000, its use as a living document influencing good practice is sometimes limited to Māori staff working with Māori students. Over time however, culturally relevant services for Māori have increased in number and this has meant more collaboration between student service groups.

The Māori and Pasifika mentoring program, Te Pūtahi Atawahi, was established in 2002, stemming from the pilot program Manaaki Pihipihinga, which encompassed the philosophy of building culturally relevant learning environments based on Māori and Pasifika frameworks. The research underpinning the development of the Manaaki Pihipihinga program revealed that Māori and Pasifika students identified difficulties such as "transition from school to university life, finding their way around, understanding the specific requirements, the demands of the university, being motivated to study, approaching tutors and lecturers, pastoral care and academic support" (Chu, 2009, p. 116). Chu also found that consideration of cultural needs and a supportive environment were critical in order to enhance the learning experience of both Māori and Pasifika students. For these reasons, a *whanau* approach to academic mentoring and holistic support is central to the program (Chu). The core values underpinning Te Pūtahi Atawhai philosophy are *Kotahitanga* (unity), *Ako* (teaching and learning), *Manaakitanga* (empathy/hospitality), *Whakamana* (respect), *Whakanui* (acknowledging success), *Whakawhanaungatanga* (building strong networks) and *Rangatiratanga* (bringing groups together/Self-direction).

In addition to providing targeted support for Māori and Pasifika (as well as for equity groups such as International and refugee-background students), VUW offers campus-wide programs to help all first-years successfully transition into university life. Two such programs, also delivered by Student Academic Services (SAS), are Peer Assisted Study Support (PASS) and Campus Coaches. PASS has operated at VUW since 1999, initially funded by Victoria International to help familiarise Commerce students from other cultures with the New

Zealand tertiary context (Ballard & Clanchy, 1991; Laurs, 2002), However, since 2000, the program, in which peer leaders foster active learning and group interaction through facilitating weekly study sessions (Blanc, De Buhr & Martin, 1983; Laurs, 2009, 2012; van der Meer & Scott, 2008), has been extended to all students in a wide range of core first-year courses. Complementing PASS's academic support, Campus Coaches, introduced in 2007, operates during Orientation Week, with senior students acting as mentors for groups of first-years and "personalising the campus experience by putting a friendly, informed and interactive interface in place [which] extends academic integration to the social as well as personal aspects of campus life" (Clark & Crome, 2004, p. 9).

In each of these programs, the focus is firmly on students supporting students (Clark & Crome, 2005), with role-specific training and on-going oversight provided by the separate units within SAS. Involvement in such leadership roles (together with a voluntary community service component) contributes towards the university's prestigious Victoria Plus award, which is presented by the Vice Chancellor and recorded on recipient' academic transcripts.

Joined-up thinking: Combined student-leader training

For many years, however, despite having a common purpose (and very often the same student leaders), each student-leadership program operated largely in isolation, a trend already noted by Krause, Hartley, James and McInnes in 2005 and further reiterated by the online FYHE Peer Program SIG forum (2012):

> First year support efforts have tended to be piecemeal in the main, developed and sustained by individuals or small groups who champion the cause of first year transition. We have now reached the stage where universities must recognise the need for institution-wide approaches to enhancing the first year experience. (Krause et al. 2005, p. 89)

In response to this challenge, in 2011, SAS brought Student Learning Support Services (SLSS), Disability Services, Te Pūtahi Atawhai and Career Development together into a combined Retention, Achievement and Equity (RAE) team in an effort to facilitate a seamless student experience.

As a consequence, in 2012, RAE team members from SLSS, Disability Services and Te Pūtahi Atawhai collaborated to develop a holistic training module to serve as a foundation for all student-leadership roles within the university. This core training, led by staff from Te Pūtahi Atawhai and SLSS employing active learning principles, comprises a one-hour session, ideally delivered immediately before role-specific training, and has a three-fold- focus. Beginning with an introduction to the university's values and mission statement led by (Pakeha) SLSS staff, the training seeks to ground student leaders within the university community from the very start. Participants then undertake a self-appraisal exercise, designed to identify the strengths they bring to the role and their inner resources in terms of resilience and problem-solving. Such preliminary diagnostics are further developed within the respective role-specific training sessions, as is the final section, which briefly invites student leaders to think about diversity on campus and introduces them to key support services.

The main part of the core training, delivered by staff from Te Pūtahi Atawhai, focuses on the principles of the Treaty of

Waitangi and core Māori values, by asking student leaders

- To engage with the Treaty of Waitangi from the perspective of a relationship and to reflect on how this should influence their practice;

- To create an atmosphere of openness and genuine engagement as a platform from which to discuss the Treaty of Waitangi and its relevance to their roles within the university; and

- To acknowledge positive steps that have already been taken, and to identify pathways for growth.

The process begins with asking student leaders to tell us what they already know about the Treaty of Waitangi, giving the facilitators the opportunity to gauge the level of understanding and giving the students an opportunity to impart their knowledge building confidence within the group. The group is then encouraged to think of what makes a good relationship and the differences between a positive relationship and a negative one. This acknowledges best practices and helps the group to think of positive avenues they can follow when building a relationship with the Treaty of Waitangi and also with others.

After a positive discourse about relationship-building, the training moves on to explaining the values that underpin Te Pūtahi Atawhai philosophy and Māori culture. The Māori concepts are demystified to help students better understand how they already apply these in everyday life, and how these values help in forming good relationships when enacted. The training also points out other avenues students can access to enhance

their relationship with Māori language and culture. The deliverance of this session, together with on-going positive reinforcement within the various role-specific trainings, sows the seeds for attitudinal change amongst student leaders and members of the first-year student body.

Building a family: Extending Māori values campus-wide

The impact of this core training has wide ramifications. As well as equipping leaders with an understanding of the university's mission, it also provides a strong foundation upon which to base their interactions with others. Given that many of the student leaders are international students, this training also helps them develop a sense of belonging within Aotearoa/New Zealand themselves. Moreover, by extending these humanistic values beyond the Māori student context, the core leader training opens the way for their adoption within the wider institutional setting.

First trialed in 2012 with 120 Campus Coaches and 60 PASS Leaders (who together went on to support nearly 2000 first-years), the RAE core training module will this year be further extended -- most excitingly--to tutor training. This is a particular coup in that tutors are often the first point of contact for new students, yet experience suggests that many are uncertain about how to build a learning environment, tending to skip over icebreakers in favour of the more familiar ground of subject content. Through highlighting the cross-cultural universality of these Māori values, we seek to empower student leaders with the confidence in community-building to support their peers' retention and success. In this way, our collaborative venture, designed and

delivered in partnership, aims to sow the seeds, little by little, to foster a sense of belonging (*whanaungatanga*) within the university community as a whole.

Nuts & Bolts Session Feedback:

Nāu te raurau, Nāku te raurau, ka ora ai te iwi

(With my knowledge and your knowledge, we can grow together)

In our session, participants first discussed the key elements of a healthy relationship (respect, power, listening, trust, communication, problem solving) and the features of an unhealthy or dysfunctional one (disrespect, disempowerment... the antithesis of the first list). They then reflected on the universality of these values, and how looking at the Treaty of Waitangi as the basis for a relationship allows us to both demystify and apply the principles of the Treaty in a way that is natural, non-threatening and achieveable for student leaders. While race relations, diversity, and government may be intimidating topics for some, everyone knows what is important in a relationship. Therefore, by approaching from the perspective of fostering strong relationship-building environments for our students, we provide a platform from which to learn and build community in a cross-cultural context.

Groups were then asked to reflect on key values which shape a Māori concept of relationship and how they might be applied within their specific context. Reflections from this discussion centred around the need for a university-wide values framework, and the importance of

integrating indigenous thought in professional and leadership development.

Participants felt many of the values recognised a community approach that placed the student as an independent being set in the context of inter-dependency. Although students are expected to be self-motivated in pursuit of their own goals, it is necessary for them to be connected with a community who will support them in their journey, and whom the student in turn will support. One participant aptly commented that this seems contrary to the western frameworks of assessment, guidance and support at many of our universities. Because these Māori values are based around the importance of relationships, the implementation needs to reflect that, ideally resulting in university-wide leadership initiatives built around core concepts and values.

Overall, the group responded positively to the inclusion of indigenous thought in developing leadership models. One participant commented on the beauty of using different languages to explore and flesh out the same concept. She acknowledged that, while concepts are similar across cultures, the use of different languages allows us to highlight and develop various perspectives and attributes for the same core value. Participants also affirmed what they saw as a "melding" of Anglo and Māori cultures in order to bring together the strengths of both.

This is one way that we, at VUW, have attempted to approach and grapple with the idea of leadership within a bi-cultural nation and a multi-cultural university. Points for further reflection include looking at staff development in order to model and reflect to our students what we hope to achieve, how this might be fulfilled in other

contexts where indigeneous people do not have such recognition, and ways in which student leaders can be encouraged to embrace their learning to further enhance cross-cultural relationships.

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