

**Culturally relevant peer support for Māori
and Pasifika student engagement, retention
and success**

Programme report

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Executive summary

A programme of culturally relevant peer support was trialled with first-year Māori and Pasifika students studying in degree and diploma programmes at the Open Polytechnic. One hundred and fifty students were contacted via telephone during semester one 2008 and offered support. The programme was informed by Kaupapa Māori Theory and principles of inclusive teaching practice and aimed to enhance student engagement and success.

Specifically, the programme's objectives were:

1. To welcome students to the Open Polytechnic learning community and help make a positive start to study.
2. To help students plan their study and manage assignment tasks.
3. To help students identify areas where they needed support and provide that support.
4. To encourage students to contact their tutor or other staff for assistance with any concerns.

The programme was based on proactive contact with students rather than relying on student self-referral and contact was at times that have been identified as critical points in students' progress through their courses (Simpson, 2000).

The peer supporters worked from a script developed by Learning Advisers in conjunction with tutors which provided a guide for conversation rather than a prescription. All conversations were recorded in a database, salient points noted and issues for referral to tutors and learning support staff identified.

At the conclusion of the programme, information from the peer support records, students' academic records and the student survey was examined and basic themes extracted. Results reveal that first year Māori and Pasifika students, studying at a distance, value the opportunity to have regular contact with knowledgeable peers in addition to their tutors. They find the contact encouraging and motivational; it enables them to deal more effectively with the demands of study and to feel part of a learning community. This contact, which occurs at key decision-making points in students' progress through their courses, assists in the identification of issues that might be a barrier to that progress and provides opportunities to resolve these in a timely manner.

Six suggestions for learning support practice are given: provide academic counselling and pre-enrolment advice; offer academic preparation and study skills assistance; provide opportunities for meaningful and regular contact with students; make peer mentoring and support services available; advise and assist students who indicate they might withdraw from their studies; offer teacher professional development.

Introduction

The Open Polytechnic enrolls one of the ITP sector's largest group of Māori learners (Open Polytechnic, 2007). In 2007 it enrolled 4,555 Māori and 1200 Pasifika students. Open Polytechnic students are mainly adult part-time learners in the workforce who are studying to up skill for job or career reasons.¹

At an Open Polytechnic Māori Learning Support Advisory Group hui in June and a Pacific Advisory Committee fono in July 2007, a number of recommendations were made in response to the question "How can we strengthen our connection with our Maori and Pasifika learners in order to enhance their engagement, retention and success?" Two recommendations were:

1. explore ways to initiate more person-to-person contact with students
2. create peer and/or mentor networks.

In response to these recommendations the Learning Centre Te Wāhanga Whakapakari Ako developed a peer support programme which was piloted in semester one this year.

This report presents findings from the pilot programme and gives suggestions for learning support practice for Māori and Pasifika students in open and distance learning (ODL). In addition, it describes projects currently in development that have been informed by the results of the programme.

Background

The engagement and retention of tertiary students, particularly Māori and Pasifika, is of strategic importance. The Tertiary Education Strategy 2007-12 (Ministry of Education, 2006) remains focused on increasing Māori and Pasifika student participation and achievement, and, while there has been significant growth in the number of Māori and Pasifika people enrolling in tertiary education in recent years (Earle, 2008), engagement and retention continue to be problematic.

Engagement and retention can be particularly acute issues in the distance learning environment where students often report feelings of isolation, little sense of connection and belonging, and are challenged to maintain engagement in and motivation for learning. However, extensive research (Earle, 2007; Crosling, Thomas & Heagney, 2008; Gibbs, Regan & Simpson, 2007; Zepke, Leach, & Prebble, 2003) has shown that early, appropriate and regular learning support has a positive and lasting effect on retention and academic and social outcomes.

Against this background, and informed by the recommendations of the Māori and Pacific Advisory Committees, the programme of culturally relevant peer support was developed. This programme aimed to encourage and support first year Māori and

¹ 73 per cent of Māori and Pasifika students are aged 25 and over; 63 and 57 per cent of Māori and Pasifika students respectively are female.

Pasifika students studying degree and diploma programmes to actively engage with their learning, complete their courses successfully and re-enrol.

In order to effect this the programme focused on working with students to identify learning needs, provide support and advice in a timely manner, help build a sense of connection and belonging to a community of learners, and increase academic enjoyment and motivation (Gavala & Flett, 2005).

The programme is informed by research which shows that enhanced support for Māori and Pasifika students, particularly first year students, has a positive impact on successful outcomes (Earle, 2007, 2008; Gavala & Flett, 2005; Airini, O'Shea, Tarawa, Sauini, Ulugia-Pua, To'aiga, et al, 2007). Additionally, it takes into account other research which reveals that students' peers make important contributions to positive outcomes (Glaser, Hall & Halperin, 2005; Moran, & Gonyea, 2003; Zepke, Leach, & Prebble, 2003). Furthermore, engagement with learning is strengthened when students feel accepted and affirmed, and that they belong (Johnson, Soldner, Leonard, Alvarez, Inkelas, Rowan-Kenyon et al, 2007; Read, Archer & Leathwood, 2003) and in ODL, contact with students is a key to in-course retention (Simpson, 2000).

In addition to the research literature, the programme is informed by work carried out at the Open University (UK), and based on an Open Polytechnic Learning Centre programme of peer support which targets low retention courses and high attrition programmes. Over the past two years, in combination with other retention strategies, this programme has delivered an average increase in retention of six per cent on specific courses and one and a half per cent decrease in attrition on selected programmes. Student and tutor reported outcomes from the programme include: increased student motivation and engagement with study, increased likelihood that students will contact tutors or learning support staff when experiencing difficulties, and students feeling less isolated and more supported in their studies.

The peer support programme for Māori and Pasifika students was designed to build on this success and provide meaningful and timely support for first year students in a culturally relevant manner.

Cultural relevance of peer support

Kaupapa Māori theory is a theory of change and incorporates a practice which is pliable, easily modified and very powerful in developing the needs and aspirations of Māori. Kaupapa Māori theory does not put aside Pākehā knowledge or culture; rather it extracts the excellence from both worlds. In Kaupapa Māori, learning houses, Māori language, culture, knowledge and values are accepted in their own right.

The role and importance of critical theory and Kaupapa Māori theory are necessary frameworks for understanding Māori education because both approaches have common factors and complement each other. McMurchy-Pilkington argues that "Kaupapa Māori can be described as critical theory at a localised level" (2001, p.73).

Graham Smith (1991), one of the first advocates of Kaupapa Māori, documents the change principles or intervention elements that are significant to Kaupapa Māori and three of those principles are clearly defined in the peer support programme.

Ako Māori or culturally preferred pedagogies (the notion of korero)

The programme embraces the concept of Ako Māori and promotes the peer support concept by highlighting the Kaupapa Māori principle of tuakana-teina (peer support). It offers the distance learner the opportunity to korero (discuss) their study progress and to get practical advice about academic matters. Māori derives from an oral culture and the peer support programme incorporates a culturally relevant value of Māoritanga.

Whānau or the extended family principle (the notion of whānau)

The programme is a practical example of whānau in action. The notion of whānau happens because the programme is able to facilitate the conditions through which the student and peer supporter can form a trust relationship; this is culturally relevant for the Māori learner and the whānau learning environment.

Kaupapa or the collective philosophy (the notion of community)

The notion of collectiveness or community is an integral element associated with indigenous peoples. The peer support programme contributes to students' sense of belonging and being part of a learning community. Distance learning can be isolating for all students, but Māori students in particular do not participate well when isolated. The peer support programme is a useful tool to engage Māori students in their learning by involving them in contributing to the notion of kaupapa. Kaupapa involves the values of sharing, trusting, helping and collaboration and are the foundations on which the programme is built.

The peer support programme Pasifika is informed by a pastoral care model of student support which is associated with peer tutoring and mentoring at an individual level, and has been widened to accommodate other factors reported as critical to Pasifika student success. These factors include the recognition of students' cultural identity and the importance of home/school relations (Fletcher, Parkhill, Fa'afoi, Taleni, & O'Regan, 2008). Recent research (Airini, O'Shea, Tarawa, Sauni, Ulugia-Pua, Sua-Huirua, et al, 2007) reveals that it is very important to students not to be seen as just a number and they value a 'hands-on' relationship with academic and non academic staff. Principled relationships which involve "meaningful engagement, reciprocity and participation" (ibid, p.6) are also important.

Pasifika students respond positively to opportunities for dialogue (ibid). An interactive approach where peer supporters and students discuss personal and educational motivations, clarify assignment topics, and discuss queries related to learning and course materials, gels with the Pasifika concept of "Talanoa" (Fletcher, Parkhill, Fa'afoi, Taleni, & O'Regan, 2008, p.3) which favours dialogue as a means of gathering and sharing information rather than a one way didactic approach often favoured in academia.

When anchored in the shared ownership or co-construction of the outcome of the Talanoa, that is, engagement in study, the factors outlined above inform both the

individualised, dialogic and hands on approach of the peer support programme and the training of the peer supporters.

Programme objectives

1. To welcome students to the Open Polytechnic learning community and help make a positive start to study.
2. To help students plan their study and manage assignment tasks.
3. To help students identify areas where they need support and provide that support.
4. To encourage students to contact their tutor or other staff for assistance with any concerns.

Peer supporter selection and training

The peer supporters, who were not Māori or Pasifika, were selected from the existing pool of trained and experienced peer support staff.² They were chosen for their ability to empathise with a diversity of peoples coupled with a mature attitude to cultural differences. In addition, they had lived and/or worked with Māori and Pasifika people for part of their lives. These peer supporters had an understanding of Māori and Pasifika culture and kaupapa which helped them to contextualise Māori and Pasifika learning. They were able to dig deep in their questioning technique to extract relevant information in order to provide sound advice to the students. The staff have academic qualifications in adult learning and social work and practical experience in these areas. Additional training and support was provided to the peer support staff by the Kaiārahi Akoranga Māori (Learning Adviser Māori) and the Pasifika Adviser in addition to the Peer Support Programme Coordinator.

In order to provide culturally relevant support to students the peer supporters worked within the principles of Kaupapa Māori Theory and a context of inclusive teaching practice.

Working with Māori students

The peer supporters were guided by the following as they worked with Māori students.

The importance of building positive relationships

Establishing effective rapport and relationships is essential and relates to Whānau or the extended family principle. The whānau and the practice of whānaungatanga (extended family) is an integral part of Māori culture and identity. The cultural values, customs and practices which organise around the whānau and 'collective responsibility' are a necessary part of Māori survival and educational achievement.

² Peer support staff are current tertiary students or recent graduates.

The need to draw on their own sense of cultural diversity

Experiencing diverse cultures through workplaces, social or family situations can help develop empathy for marginalised groups. This experience and the ability to draw on it is important and relates to Taonga Tuku Iho or the cultural aspirations principle. This principle acknowledges the strong emotional and spiritual factor in Kaupapa Māori which is introduced to support the commitment of Māori to the intervention in the educational crisis. According to Morrison (1999) the overlap of curriculum and pedagogy is a critical one in that Māori students need to be both able and comfortable to discuss issues of direct relevance to them and to do that in ways that are appropriate.

Having a confident self-identity

Self assurance and confidence in one's identity means that cultural differences do not intimidate; difference is accepted and embraced. This relates to Tino Rangatiratanga or the self-determination principle. The principle of Tino Rangatiratanga has guided Kaupapa Māori initiatives, reinforcing the goals of seeking more meaningful control over one's own life and cultural well being.

Possessing and reflecting an altruistic attitude

Having a considerate, unselfish attitude, in addition to enjoying social contacts, leads people to give generously of their time, support and knowledge to others in the community. This relates to Ako Māori or culturally preferred pedagogy. The Ako Māori principle promotes teaching and learning practices that are unique to Māori. It strongly advocates peer support through the concepts of tuakana-teina (older-younger sibling relationship), whānaungatanga and āwhina (help/ support) as culturally defined pedagogical methods that highlight Māori processes of ako - of learning and teaching.

Working with Pasifika students

To support the building of cohesive relationships within a framework for learning, the following factors - reported by Pasifika students as helpful and engaging – guided the peer supporters' work:

- building meaningful relationships
- responsiveness
- the importance of family
- recognition of culture.

Consideration was also given to the fact that Pasifika describes a vast number of unique nationalities and encompasses thousands of languages, dialects and communities.

To assume that individual learning styles and preferences are due solely to ethnicity can counteract the provision of effective learning support. Also, deferring to cultural practices and mores without a full understanding of these could be misinterpreted as tokenism. Therefore, rather than apply explicit strategies, the peer supporters' work was situated within the wider context of inclusive teaching practices. In this way, working "prescriptively according to broad, under-examined generalities about groups" (Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003, p.20) was avoided.

In accordance with the above factors and Kaupapa Māori guidelines, the peer supporters were mentored to develop and convey the following skills and attitudes: positive relationships, cultural diversity, confident self-identity, willingness to learn and an altruistic attitude. By conveying authenticity and responsiveness the peer supporters co-constructed a climate of trust which is central to student engagement.

Programme structure and duration

The programme offered support to students via telephone during weekday evenings, when students were most likely to be available to discuss their study, throughout the first semester in 2008. It was a programme of proactive contact with students rather than one which relied on student self-referral. The contact was at times that have been identified as critical points in students' progress through their courses (Simpson, 2000) with the aim of providing timely and appropriate support to enhance learning and encourage persistence. The peer supporters provided students with advice, additional study resources and referral to tutors and learning support staff as appropriate.

Simpson (ibid) identifies a number of critical points in students' progress including: start of the course, before the first assignment, after the first assignment, mid-course, pre-exam, and post-exam. The peer support programme identified three key contact times which correlated with the following critical points in students' progress:

1. *Start of the course/before first assignment*
Conversation focused on: getting started, dealing with course materials, planning study, preparing for and tackling the first assignment.
2. *Second assignment/mid-course*
Conversation focused on: progress, first assignment results, preparing for and tackling the second assignment, going on/dropping out: options.
3. *Pre-exam/final assignment*
Conversation focused on: preparing and revising, dealing with exam stress, writing exams; second assignment results, preparing for and tackling the last assignment.

In addition, Māori students were contacted towards the end of the semester by the Kaiārahi Akoranga Māori (Learning Adviser Māori) and further study, re-enrolment options and course choices were discussed.

The peer supporters worked from a script (Appendix 1) developed by the Learning Advisers in conjunction with tutors. The script provided a guide for conversation rather than a prescription. All conversations were recorded in a database, salient points noted and issues for referral to tutors and learning support staff identified. Reports were collated and sent to tutors and Learning Advisers after each round of student contact to ensure that all follow-up matters were actioned.

Programme evaluation

Students were surveyed (Appendix 2) by telephone and asked to respond to a number of statements, the content of which was derived from students' comments documented in the peer support records and from the literature. In addition, students were asked to rate on a scale of one to five the importance to their learning of each statement. Twenty one Pasifika students participated in the survey and 91 Māori students. Staff who had not been involved in the peer support programme conducted the student survey interviews.

Programme results

Information from the peer support records, students' academic records and the student survey was examined and basic themes extracted. These form the basis of the results which follow.

Peer contact Māori students

At the time of the first phone call 79 per cent of students were positive about their study and confident that they would complete their course/s. Some students were finding time management a challenge and others were struggling a little with a two/three course workload. Students' comments included:

I'm three weeks behind because there was a delay in getting the textbook. I've applied for an extension but haven't heard back yet but I'm confident that I'll be able to catch up. I'm enjoying studying and I have cut down my work hours to give me more time for it.

I've submitted my assignment already. I'm finding that I'm busy – juggling children, work and study, but I'm enjoying the challenge.

I'm feeling quite under pressure with two courses at once, but I've sent in my assignment - after getting an extension – and I'll wait and see my results and then review things.

By the time of the second phone only 55 per cent of students had completed their first assignment. Seventeen per cent had decided to transfer their course enrolment to semester two and a further 14 per cent had withdrawn. Some students were finding distance study difficult; the isolation and lack of regular contact with teaching staff was particularly challenging. Students said:

I'm waiting to receive feedback on my first assignment and will start and complete my next two assignments once I get this. It can be a bit hard fitting study in around my work, etc, but I set aside time in the weekends for it and this is working okay at the moment.

I'm struggling at the moment because I am doing two other papers through [another TEI]. I work full time and study through to 1.00am in the morning.

I'd really like a study buddy and I've tried but with no success to set something up.

I'm going to have to put my study on hold for a while. I really need face-to-face contact with a tutor and other students.

At the time of the third phone call the majority of students were cautiously optimistic and were making good progress with exam revision. They reported:

I am really pleased with my results. I have worked hard all semester and I work full-time too; time management is the key. I have been working hard for the exam which is in two weeks.

I'm sitting three exams so I'm up to my neck in revision!

I'm into my revision at moment. I have found this course hard but I think I will pass it.

By the end of the semester, 60 per cent of students had successfully completed their course/s or were still studying.

Students with little or no previous academic experience and course completion

Slightly over half the students had little or no previous formal education: 22.5 per cent had NCEA Level 1 and 28 per cent had no secondary school qualifications. Of the students with NCEA Level 1, 59 per cent successfully completed their course/s, 14 per cent transferred to the next semester and 27 per cent did not complete. Only 23 per cent of the students with no secondary school qualifications were successful in their studies and 15 per cent transferred. The remaining 62 per cent did not successfully complete their course/s.

Students with more than one course enrolment and course completion

Seventeen per cent of students were studying two or more courses. Students studying three courses had a lesser success than those studying two: 24 per cent successful completion compared to 58 per cent.

Students who have support at work or home, and/or regular tutor contact, and course completion

All students who were working in their chosen field of study, had regular contact with their tutor and/or had strong family support (apart from one who transferred to the next semester) finished all required assignments and were confident of completing their courses successfully.³ Students' comments included: "I'm getting plenty of help at work", and, "my tutor's in touch weekly which really helps."

Student withdrawal

Nineteen per cent of students withdrew from their studies. The majority however did not complete formal applications to withdraw.

³ These students were studying courses with a year end completion date.

Peer contact Pasifika students

At the time of the first phone call 78 per cent of students were positive about their study, believed they would complete it successfully and had no other significant comments to make about their study or progress. Some students had made a late start to their studies and others were finding time management challenging. Students' comments included:

I'm a little bit behind but I am determined to get my first assignment in on time. Otherwise my study is going well and I am enjoying it.

I'm keeping up with my workload and have been in touch with my tutor. I use the Online Campus regularly and find it very useful.

I'm finding distance learning a challenge. I'm struggling a little with managing my time; I have two small children and it's a bit of a juggling act.

By the time of the second phone call, 69 per cent of students had completed their first assignment and 20 per cent of students had decided to transfer their course enrolment to semester two. Some student were still struggling with time and study management and meeting assignment deadlines. Students said:

I'm still struggling with managing my time and I haven't been able to complete all my assignments.

I'm battling on. Am finding this paper far more interesting than the other one and I've completed some of the assignments.

I'm going quite well. I'm on track to get my next assignment in on time. I don't have any problems or concerns at the moment.

At the time of the third phone call, the majority of the students were on track with their exam revision and preparation. Students reported:

I'm doing fine - getting ready and revising for my exam.

I'm confident that I will complete this course; I got good results in my assignments.

I'm doing okay. I'm not familiar with litigation work but I'll get some past exam papers and practise the questions.

By the end of the semester, 64 per cent of students had successfully completed their course/s or were still studying.

Students with little or no previous academic experience and course completion

Just over one quarter of the students had little or no previous formal education: 16 per cent had NCEA Level 1 and 12 per cent no secondary school qualifications. Twenty five per cent of the students with NCEA Level 1 successfully completed their course/s, 50 per cent transferred and the rest did not complete. Of the students with

no secondary qualifications, 65 per cent did not complete their course/s successfully; the others transferred to the next semester.

Students with more than one course enrolment and course completion

Sixteen per cent of the students were studying two or more courses. None of these students completed any of their courses successfully.

Students who have support at work and course completion

Students who were working in their chosen study field successfully completed all their assignments.⁴ They reported being comfortable with the level of study and receiving support from their workplace. One student initially said she was bored by the study and had been talked into it. By the time of the second telephone call she reported she was “battling on and have completed some assignments. I have good support at work.”

Student withdrawal

Twenty four per cent of students withdrew from their studies. However, the majority did not complete formal applications to withdraw.

Student survey

Māori students

Ninety-one students were interviewed about the effectiveness of the peer support programme. They were asked to respond to a number of statements and to rate how important to their learning each of those statements was.⁵

Study Skills

Many students (90 per cent) agreed that the peer supporters helped them with their study skills, and the majority gave this a rating of 4-5 in terms of importance to their learning. Students said:

The peer supporter encouraged me to register for the online study skills workshop and I found it most helpful.

The caller put me in contact with the Learning Centre to help me with my grammar.

Motivation

The peer supporters helped and motivated 92 per cent of the students to keep going with their studies. All of these students rated the importance of this as 4-5 on the scale. Students' comments included:

I felt really good after the peer supporter talked with me. Studying on your own is very lonely.

I am self-motivated but getting the phone calls helped me to focus on my study.

⁴ These students were studying the Legal Executive Certificate, the exam for which is held in October; successful course completion figures are not yet available.

⁵ Rating scale 1-5: 1 = not important and 5 = very important

I needed someone to look over my shoulder and the calls helped me through a time when I didn't want to do any work.

Study goals

The majority of students (86 per cent) considered that the peer supporters helped them to achieve their study goals and they rated this help as 4-5 in importance. Many students indicated that with other commitments - family, work, sport - study was often prioritised last. One student said:

It's hard working full-time and trying to fit other stuff around study, but I found it great just to talk with someone as it helped me to get back on track again and reminded me about what I was studying for.

Those students (14 percent) who rated this factor as being less influential (scale 1-2) were very focused on what they wanted to achieve and had very clear goals for that. These included: up skilling for the workplace, financial gain and higher qualifications. One student told us:

I am pretty good at managing my time so I found that I could focus on my goals really well.

Workload

Many of the students were new to the distance learning environment and/or were returning to study after a long break and 87 per cent of them stated that the peer supporters had helped them with strategies to manage workload. Students said that they appreciated having someone they could talk to about this and all rated it 4-5. Their comments included:

I have found study hard because it's been a long time since I did anything like this, but I have had great encouragement from [peer supporter].

The peer supporter understood where I was coming from. She was a student too and knew how busy life can be - especially having a young family and other things going on in life. She gave me one or two strategies that she used to help manage workload and everything else.

Belonging

Almost all (98 per cent) of the students who were surveyed stated strongly that belonging to a learning group - the notion of tatau tatau - was important to them. All of these students rated it as being very important (5 on the scale). Students said:

Studying by yourself is very lonely so getting a phone call from the peer supporter made me feel a part of a group.

I don't like working on my own but I have to because I can't give up my job. However, when the telephone call came and the peer supporter talked to me about my study it felt like I was with someone else in a classroom.

Personal problems

A small number of students said that talking to a peer supporter helped them with personal problems. The majority (96 per cent) did not consider this factor as important to their learning because they had extended whānau (family) and friends to whom they could talk or access to other agencies.

The students who did talk to the peer supporter about their personal problems were mostly referred on to their tutor or to a Learning Adviser. Students said they appreciated the practical advice offered and follow up action suggested by the peer supporter and that this had been important to them.

Communication with tutor

Approximately half of the students considered that the peer supporter was very helpful in acting as a broker between them and their tutor. They said that this was important to them (rating 4-5) because they were too whakama (shy) to talk to a person in 'authority'. Students added that the peer supporter was able to talk them into contacting their tutor because they said it would help them with their studies. After having contacted their tutor for the first time students had the confidence to do so again. A student told us that:

I didn't want to talk to my tutor because I might say the wrong thing, but the peer supporter told me it would be okay. She told me it was important for me to talk about my assignment with my tutor because he would be the only one who could give the right advice.

The other half of the students said that the peer supporter had not helped them to contact their tutor. These students were confident and able to contact their tutor when and if required. One student said:

I haven't talked to my tutor but I will when I need to. At the moment I'm okay.

Three students who had withdrawn from their study took part in the survey. They all said that the peer support contact had had no positive influence on their learning because trying to fit study around work, family and social commitments was just too difficult to manage. The three students told us:

I just had too much on in my life and I couldn't cope with study. I didn't know how hard it was going to be.

I wasn't prepared for study. I just couldn't cope with all the learning. I don't think I have what it takes to study.

I couldn't cope with family, work and study. I had to give up something and study was it. My dad died and I had to take care of my mum which is okay. Family is important to me.

Despite this, all of these students acknowledged that the feeling of belonging to a learning group/community was very important to their learning.

Pasifika students

Twenty one Pasifika students were interviewed about the effectiveness of the peer support programme. Unfortunately the results were collated all together and reported generally by the staff member who carried out the student interviews; they represent students' views about the importance of the calls in general, rather than the importance to students' learning of the individual factors.

Eighteen students responded *yes* to all statements with a grade of importance of the call ranging between *three* and *five*. Two students did not grade their responses. One student responded with *no* to one particular question. When asked, "The peer support phone calls helped me manage my workload", the student replied:

I am an ex-university student so I feel that I had the workload issue well managed from the outset.

One student answered *no* to all questions, graded all questions with *two* and added the comment:

I didn't find the [peer support] phone calls useful and would rather speak to my tutor.

Five students rated the peer support contact as *three*. Their comments included:

I work okay on my own and am motivated to study but the phone calls were still good to have.

I have withdrawn from my course. I did find the calls useful because I haven't had any contact from my tutor.

I struggled to fit my study in. I will start to use email and the course forum as contact, but still feel that the telephone contact is useful.

Three students gave the telephone calls a rating of *four*. They commented:

I haven't had any contact from my tutor and I was grateful for the peer support phone calls.

The calls helped me with my motivation and it was good to be able to talk to someone about how to fit my study in.

I found the phone calls supportive and encouraging. They are important.

The remaining ten students rated the peer support phone calls as *five*. They said:

The peer support calls do help because I can feel quite disconnected with the distance study.

Yes, I find the phone calls most definitely useful and beneficial and I rate them as very important. I do make contact with my tutor. Contact is good.

Conclusion

The peer support programme was developed in response to recommendations made at the Open Polytechnic Māori and Pasifika Advisory Groups' hui and fono in 2007 in addition to the Learning Centre's desire to provide culturally relevant support for Māori and Pasifika learners to enhance their learning and success.

The results of the programme reveal that first year Māori and Pasifika students studying at a distance value the opportunity to have regular contact with knowledgeable peers in addition to their tutors. They find the contact encouraging and motivational; it enables them to deal more effectively with the demands of study and to feel part of a learning community. This contact, which occurs at key decision-making points in students' progress through their courses, assists in the identification of issues that might be a barrier to successful completion and provides opportunities to resolve these in a timely manner.

Students, particularly Māori students, placed great importance on belonging – the notion of tatau tatau. They considered that the regular contact with the peer supporters had contributed positively to their sense of belonging. This response from students is an indication of how culturally relevant the peer support programme is even when departure is imminent.

Suggestions for practice

A small number of students (150) were involved in the peer support programme which aimed to help them make a positive start to their study and plan and manage it successfully. The project was not research and therefore the suggestions for practice are based on peer supporter and student accounts in addition to relevant information extracted from students' academic records.

Student engagement and persistence are complex phenomena and are influenced by institutional, personal and external factors. The suggestions for practice identified below are from an institutional perspective, in particular that of learning support, and as such could provide useful direction for those services in an open and distance learning context.

Provide academic counselling and pre-enrolment advice

The majority of the students who had low or no secondary school qualifications did not complete their courses successfully. This result aligns with recent research (Earle, 2008) which found that for Māori students entering degree study for the first time as adults "Having higher levels of school qualification is particularly important for success in extramural studies" (ibid, p.3). Students who enrolled as part-time learners in two or more courses were less successful than those enrolled in only one course. Effective pre-enrolment advice about course choice and workload can improve outcomes (Zepke, Leach & Prebble, 2003).

Provide academic preparation and study skills assistance

The provision of timely and appropriate study skills support is important to students and is effective in building confidence and skills. Many students in the peer support programme found that managing study along with work, family and other commitments was challenging. Knowing what to expect from tertiary study and developing the skills and strategies to deal with the academic demands can help mitigate those challenges. Orientation processes (Pittaway & Moss, 2006) and preparation programmes (Zeegers & Martin, 2001) help to clarify expectations, and study skills support enhances student engagement in learning (Kiernan, Lawrence & Sankey, 2006).

Provide opportunities for meaningful and regular contact with students

Students reported that the regular contact with the peer supporters was encouraging and motivational. They said also that it contributed to their sense of belonging which they regarded as very important. Students need to feel accepted and that they belong (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and regular contact with teaching and peer support staff contributes to this. Additionally, contact with students is a key to in-course retention in open and distance learning (Simpson, 2002). Such contact assists in the identification of issues that might be a barrier to successful completion and provides opportunities to resolve these in a timely manner.

Students' sense of belonging helps develop self-confidence (Black & Mackenzie, 2007) and meaningful, regular contact with teachers fosters the learning relationship and contributes to improved outcomes for students (Zepke, Leach & Prebble, 2003).

Provide peer mentoring and support services

Students reported positive outcomes from their contact with the peer supporters. Particularly important to them was the notion of tatau tatau (the opportunity to belong to a learning community) which was fostered through the contact with the peer supporters. Evidence in the literature suggests that relationships with and support from peers make important contributions to student success (Black & MacKenzie, 2007; Zepke, Leach & Prebble, 2003).

Provide advice and assistance to students who indicate they might withdraw from their studies or transfer to the next semester

Results show a discrepancy between students who completed a formal withdrawal application and those who did not. It appears that students are reluctant or don't know the processes for withdrawal (this pattern was similar with transfers). Not formally withdrawing can have repercussions if a student wants to re-enrol. Students who were not succeeding tended to fade away rather than keep on with their study despite encouragement from the peer supporters.⁶

Provide teacher professional development

According to Earle (2008) the complex set of factors which have an impact on student success are "amenable to influence through...teacher professional development" (ibid, p.3). This assertion is supported by other research (Airini, Rakena, O'Shea, Tarawa, Sauni, Ulugia-Pua, et al, 2007) which also points out that we must understand our students in order to teach them successfully. This may involve new ways of relating and new attitudes to teaching.

Practice developments

Informed by the suggestions for practice derived from this project the Learning Centre has initiated a number of learning support activity projects:

1. The telephone peer support programme continues in semester two 2008 for all first year Māori and Pasifika students studying degree and diploma programmes. Planning is underway to offer this programme to all first year Māori and Pasifika students in 2009 on a self-selection basis.

⁶ To counteract this and to ensure that students were not disadvantaged academically, the peer supporters adopted the practice of sending transfer/withdrawal forms (with relevant details filled in if appropriate) to students who were reluctant to deal with the polytechnic directly. Students indicated that this assistance was very helpful to them.

2. A virtual whare – an online community and resource portal - is in the planning stage. It will be sited on the Polytechnic's learning management system Moodle and be accessed through the Learning Centre portal. It is planned that senior students will provide online peer mentoring and support to other students in collaboration with the Kaiārahi Akoranga Māori (Learning Adviser Māori). The development of an online community and resource portal for Pasifika students will be investigated later in 2009.

3. A new approach to encouraging Māori students to participate in the online study skills workshops offered by the Learning Centre was trialled in semester two. The Kaiārahi Akoranga Māori contacted all students by e-mail and personally invited them to participate. The invitation used graphics and different fonts designed to catch students' attention. This approach resulted in an increase in the number of Māori students who participated: from five per cent of workshop participants in semester one to 25 per cent of participants in semester two.

The study skills workshops are asynchronous, flexible, and provide a variety of resources in different formats: interactive exercises, video clips, slideshows, hyperlinks to websites, and, most importantly, facilitated group forums. They provide support from peers and Learning Advisers, just in time learning, are available and accessible when needed and at times that suit students. At the end of a workshop a student told us:

Without kanohi ki te kanohi it's awesome to be part of a 'cyber whanau' - people to bounce ideas off – or to just say 'kia ora' when the times get a bit lonely.

This approach will continue and also be trialled with Pasifika students for the next workshop.

4. A series of three staff development seminars focused on providing insights on the notions of learning for Māori has been developed for delivery in 2009.

Growing a culture of learning for Māori

To raise the achievement level for Māori students, the learning must be culturally relevant to support Māori engagement, retention and success. This can be achieved through assisting the tutor/ lecturer/ staff to identify the changes in Māori education over the last few years; to promote culturally relevant support; to recognise value the concept of 'kanohi ki te kanohi' – to build a positive relationship with the student; and to contextualise the notions of learning which underpin Māori achievement.

Dressing the learner for success

Learned helplessness is the motivation problem that most affects Māori learners. The tutor/ teacher needs to recognise the characteristics pertaining to learned helplessness. Understanding the academic theory surrounding this motivational problem will shed light on how to develop academic strategies to overcome learned helplessness and to keep the student engaged in their learning.

Providing academic text for Māori learners

There is an abundance of evidence to show that Māori are visual learners, but the current display of texts nationwide portrays otherwise. Knowing how to keep the academic integrity of the course material through the text is of importance to the course designer/ tutor/ lecturer. The use of graphics and fonts to engage the Māori learner is paramount. For the Māori student, the information on a page of text must capture, engage and motivate the learner to learn.

Further seminars will be developed including those with a focus on Pasifika.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Learning Centre - Telephone Peer Support Programme semester 1, 2008 First year Maori and Pasifika students: peer supporter script ⁷

- Kia ora, my name's....., I'm calling on behalf of your tutor at the Open Polytechnic and **Caroline Rawlings, Kaiārahi Akoranga Maori (Learning Adviser, Maori)/ Cathy Watson Learning Adviser, Pasifika.**
- Is this a convenient time to call you? The call will take only a few minutes.
If not, ask if there is a better time; may also need to check pronunciation of name.
 - *If student does not identify as being Maori, explain that they included Maori on their enrolment form.*

Then you may discuss the following:

FIRST CALL

- **General intro of yourself / student.**
- **Have you received your course materials/ have a copy of the textbook?**
- **Do you feel comfortable with the level of work required? If yes, continue.**
If no, explain options: discussing course with tutor, withdraw/transfer or consider a lower level course.
- **Do you have a quiet place to study?** *This aspect can to be explored – prioritising study, perhaps setting aside a particular time as well as a particular place can help to do this.*
- **Have you visited the Online Campus/are you finding the Online Campus useful?** *Advise using Online Campus for assignment advice, study advice, library help, finding articles.*
- **If study skills are a problem - refer to the Learning Centre resource site on Online Campus, or suggest contact with learning adviser.**

Then for Assignment 1

- **Have you managed to make a start?** *Mention possible extension if student indicates non-completion of assignment on time and recommend contact with tutor.*
- **Assignment requirements are fully set out in the green-coloured pages at the end of the course material.**

⁷ The script provided a guide for conversation rather than a prescription.

Before finishing phone call:

- Check next action for students and peer supporters. May include:

Student: creating timetable, filing material, sorting out study time, place, logging onto Online Campus, contacting tutor or learning support staff.

Peer supporter: noting any change of contact details, requests for material, study issues, intention to withdraw or transfer and any follow-up required.

- **Are you happy for me to share this information with your tutor?**

Yes

No

SECOND CALL

Check: Has the student been in contact with the tutor.

- **How are you getting on with the course?**
- **Are you still comfortable with the level of work required?**

If yes – continue

If no – explain options: discussing course with tutor, withdraw/transfer/extra support.

- **Have you managed to make a start on assignment 2? Do you think you will be able to finish it by the due date?** *If not, encourage them to contact their tutor to request an extension and discuss study strategies as appropriate.*
- **If no, have you considered transferring or withdrawing from the course** *Discuss implications of these moves – could include advice to contact tutor or learning support staff for action.*
- **Have you visited your course page on the Online Campus?** *If student's course has an online campus course page.*

If no – encourage them to do so because many helpful resources are there and they can post questions and comments and read other students' questions/comments.

Before finishing phone call:

- Check next moves for students and peer supporters. May include:

Student: Checking due date for Assignment 2; may require extension call to tutor, contacting tutor/learning support staff, undertaking correct process if **transferring** or **withdrawing**.

Peer supporter: noting any students who have decided to withdraw or transfer, noting any students who may require tutor /learning support staff action for follow-up.

- **Are you happy for me to share this information with tutor?**

Yes

No

THIRD CALL

- **Have you received the exam slip and are clear about date, venue and other instructions?**
- **How are you progressing with exam revision?**
- **Do you know that you can download exam past exam papers?** *Discuss process with student if needed.*
- **Have you any specific concerns about your exam preparation?**

The following may need to be covered:

- Information that you can ask your tutor – *set-out of exam etc*
- Revision skills- *timetables, managing revision time, what to revise, how?*
- In the exam – *strategies*
- Dealing with stress / relaxation- *Discuss ideas, what has worked for peer supporter*
- Any other exam issues

Before finishing phone call:

- Check next moves for students and peer supporters. May include:

Student: checking exam slip, making sure student has (or will) obtain all information re exam from tutor, sorting out revision time, setting revision timetable, downloading part exam papers, taking part in *Examwise* online workshop, contacting learning support staff for specific information.

Peer supporter: *noting any students who have not received exam slips (for immediate action)*, noting any change of contact details, noting any students who may require tutor /learning support staff action.

- **Are you happy for me to share this information with tutor?**

Yes

No

Appendix 2

Telephone peer support programme: Student survey

1. The peer support phone calls gave me study skills advice: Y / N
How important is this to your learning? 1 2 3 4 5
-
-

2. The peer support phone calls motivated me to keep going: Y / N
How important is this to your learning? 1 2 3 4 5
-
-

3. The peer support phone calls helped me achieve my goals: Y / N
How important is this to your learning? 1 2 3 4 5
-
-

4. The peer support phone calls helped me manage my workload: Y / N
How important is this to your learning? 1 2 3 4 5
-
-

5. The peer support phone calls made me feel like a part of a group: Y / N
How important is this to your learning? 1 2 3 4 5
-
-

6. The peer support phone calls helped me manage my personal problem: Y / N
How important is this to your learning? 1 2 3 4 5
-
-

7. The peer support phone calls helped me with communication with my tutor: Y / N
How important is this to your learning? 1 2 3 4 5
-
-

8. What other ways can we support your learning?
-
-
-
-

KEY:

1 = Not important

3 = Important

5 = Very Important