

Bridges and barriers to success for Pacific Islanders completing their first year at an Australian university

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Abstract

This paper draws attention to the situation of low socio-economic groups with a non-English speaking background. In particular, it provides a preliminary study of the Pacific Islander community. In-depth interviews were conducted with two female Samoan students who had successfully completed their first year at university. We then used grounded-theory methodology with an embedding of constant comparative methods to analyse interview data. Findings showed that family support for education, equity outreach initiatives in schools, and transition programs that involve Pacific Islanders raised aspirations and encouraged access to university. Personal attributes such as agency and persistence allowed students to benefit from first-year initiatives provided by universities. Barriers to success were more evident during secondary schooling than during the first year at university. In particular, negative peer pressure discouraged aspirations. Outreach initiatives involving partnerships between schools and universities are recommended to provide the bridges that encourage success at university for members of the Pacific Islander community.

Introduction

Australians with low socio-economic status (SES) remain under-represented within higher education and continue as a target group for increased participation at universities (Bradley, 2008). They are also one-third as likely as their high SES counterparts to participate in higher education (Centre for the Study of Higher Education [CSHE], 2008) and, when they do, they are more likely to be the first in their family to attend university (Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005).

The complexity of social and educational disadvantage is well understood (Vinson, 2007; CSHE, 2008), with the range of contributing factors to low SES suggesting that the challenges are not simple. Diversity within the group is explained by demographic factors such as geographic location, gender, age, indigeneity and non-English speaking background (NESB). The last of these factors – NESB status – does not commonly co-occur with low SES. On average, NESB students attending Australian universities report higher levels of parental education than English-speaking students (Krause et al., 2005). While 42.4 per cent of NESB students are in the high SES group, less than 15 per cent are low SES (James, Baldwin, Coates, Krause & McInnis, 2004).

Many of the students within the low SES-NESB subgroup have migrant parents who did not have the opportunity to gain a university education. While it is a small cohort relative to the population of NESB students attending Australian universities, the low SES-NESB subgroup deserves attention because it is particularly under-represented. Its support requirements have been noted by James et al. (2004, p.xiv), who recommended that “universities develop focused programs for particular groups of recent immigrants as part of their responsibility for community service and engagement”.

Griffith University has responded to this recommendation with outreach initiatives targeting the Pacific Islander (PI) community¹ (James, 2008). The University draws many of its students from the Logan-Gold Coast corridor and the Logan-Ipswich corridor, which include areas identified as socially disadvantaged (Vinson, 2007). Within these corridors, the PI community is the largest ethnic community, and rapidly growing (Australian Bureau of Statistics (2006a, 2006b). Students from PI communities attending primary and secondary schools in southeast Queensland are a high-risk group for underachievement, with restrictive guidelines for English as a Second Language (ESL) support disqualifying most PI students for language support (Cottone, 2004; Kearney, 2008). Not surprisingly then, the PI group is under-represented in higher education (Kearney, Dobrenov-Major & Birch, 2005; Scull & Cuthill, 2007).

Various studies have sought to establish issues of tertiary participation for PI migrant communities. In New Zealand, there has been a clear effort on the part of government through the implementation of the Pasifika² Education Plan 2006-2010 (Ministry of Education, New Zealand, 2006) to increase the participation, retention and achievement of Pacific Islanders in higher education (Kearney, 2008). In general, issues relating to aspirations, access and achievement of Pasifika groups in New Zealand have associated with motivation and teaching practices in secondary school and in higher education (Airini, McNaughton, Langley. & Sauni, 2007), and learning contexts within universities (Ross, 2009). Here in Australia, Scull & Cuthill (2007) identified five key issues of participation in higher education. These included: 1) cost and financial considerations; 2) parents’ understanding of and involvement in children’s education; 3) school engagement and attainment; 4) perceived value and benefit of higher education; and 5) lack of tertiary-educated PI role models.

Clearly, there is a need to better understand the educational journey of successful PI students who have manoeuvred the barriers or constraints noted above, having built bridges that have encouraged their own aspirations for tertiary study and enabled their success at university. This type of understanding is fundamental to future initiatives that promote educational opportunities for the PI migrant community in Australia.

Method

Grounded theory was chosen as the methodology for this study. Within this approach, we embedded the constant comparative method of joint coding and analysis to generate properties and hypotheses about the factors associated with Samoan students’ successful

¹ The Pacific Islander community includes members from three broad island regions: Micronesia, Melanesia and Polynesia. The Polynesian group is best represented in the Logan-Gold Coast and Logan-Ipswich corridors. It includes emigrants from Samoa, Tonga, Tuvalu, Tokelau, the Cook Islands and Niue. The Samoan group is the largest emigrant group.

² Pasifika is the term used in New Zealand to refer to people from Pacific islands and territories.

completion of their first year at university. Data collection involved in-depth interviews with two female Samoan students, Mele and Shona (pseudonyms).

Mele and Shona are second-generation Samoans³, who were born in New Zealand. Both are members of large families. Mele and her family had emigrated to Australia when she was five years old. However, Shona's family had emigrated to Australia after she had completed her schooling in New Zealand. Both Mele and Shona had attended schools in low SES areas. Mele said that she had enjoyed going to school, though she did not believe that school had adequately prepared her for university. Shona had not found school a satisfying experience. She explained:

I didn't really have a good experience there in relation to learning ... I had a lot of friends. And, you know, we pretty much just went to school to hang out and to play sport ... academically it wasn't a very positive experience ... no one really aspired to do anything so we all just kind of played sport. (Int. 2, p.1, lines 17-20)

Mele is younger than Shona. She is 18 years old and had transitioned directly from Year 12 to university. Mele is the first member of her family to attend university. In contrast, Shona is in her thirties and had left school and worked for several years. During this time she had married and had been working in a local factory for ten years before deciding to gain a university education. While Shona's parents did not have the opportunity to attend university, Shona is not the first in her family to pursue tertiary study. She has older siblings who had attended university recently. Mele and Shona's pathways to tertiary study are different but they have one thing in common: both have successfully completed their first year at university. This criterion was essential for their participation in the study.

Individual interviews were conducted with Mele and Shona. These interviews were loosely structured around a core set of questions that encouraged the students to share the experience of their educational journey starting in primary school, continuing through secondary school and into their first year at university. Questions specifically related to the interviewees' explanations for their successful completion of the first year at university, and their identification of factors that assisted or hindered that success. With Mele and Shona's consent, the interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed into word documents for analysis.

Data analysis consisted of four stages as described by Glaser (1965). During the first stage, we coded data into categories of analysis and recorded our developing thinking as memos. Initially, two broad categories emerged: 1) factors that facilitated success, and 2) obstacles that were overcome to be successful. These two core categories were coded as "bridges" and "barriers". When coding a fragment of data as a category, it was compared with previous ones that were coded similarly. This constant comparison of categories within and between interviews generated more categories. For example, both "bridges" and "barriers" associated with either "access to university", "achievement at university", or "access and achievement". Further comparison of categories suggested additional dimensions that we coded as "external" where categories associated with contextual factors such as "family", "teachers", "peers" and "university", or as "internal" where categories associated with attitudes and behaviours espoused by the students.

³ The second generation are the children of immigrants. Second-generation Samoans are the children of parents who emigrated from Samoa.

At the second stage of data analysis, our coding shifted to the properties of categories. Here, we compared and contrasted these properties to develop knowledge about each category and looked for links among categorical properties to generate theory.

At the third stage, we aimed to develop our understanding of bridges and barriers for Samoan students and to refine that understanding. To do this, we constructed a hierarchical index tree for each core category. The final stage of the contrast comparative method involved writing the theory. To do this, we collated a set of coded data and memos for each category of analysis. Memos were summarised and then considered in relation to other summaries. This provided a set of broad themes related to the students’ families, peers and teachers, their university experience, and the students’ personal attributes.

Findings

Findings are shown in Figures 1 and 2. These findings provide taxonomies that illustrate pathways from core categories to more specific ones. The first taxonomy identifies bridges that encouraged success while the second taxonomy identifies barriers to success.

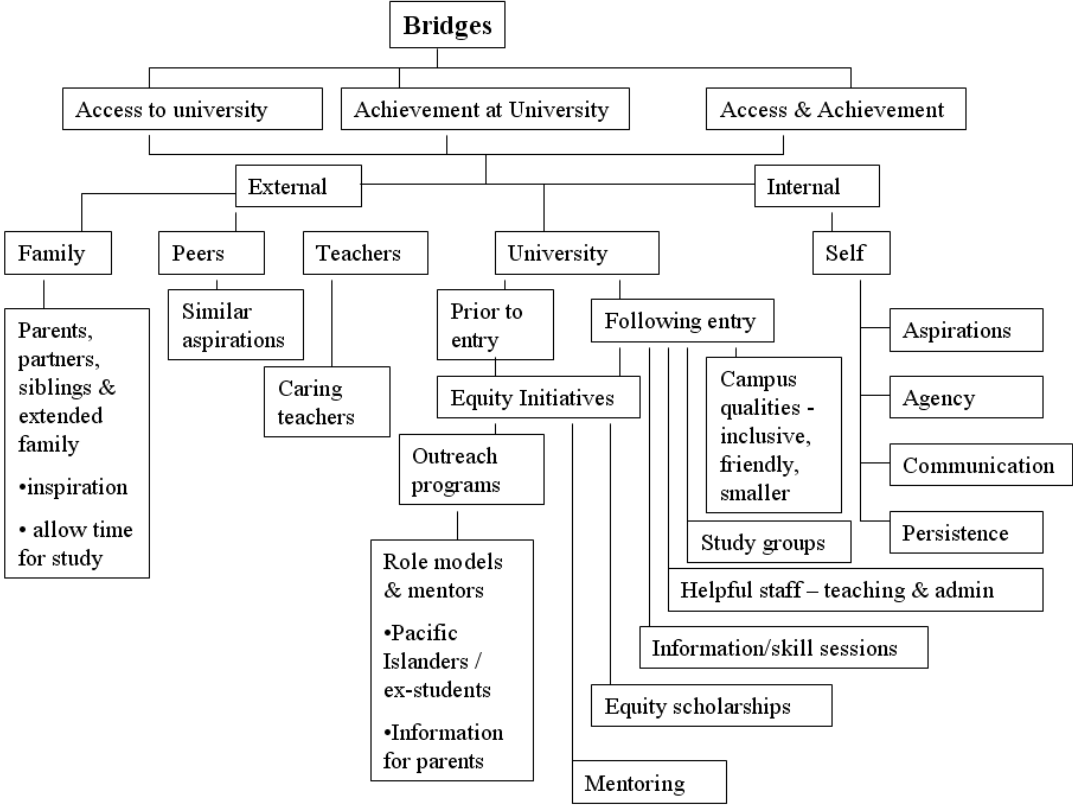


Figure 1. Categories of analysis for “bridges” coded from interview data.

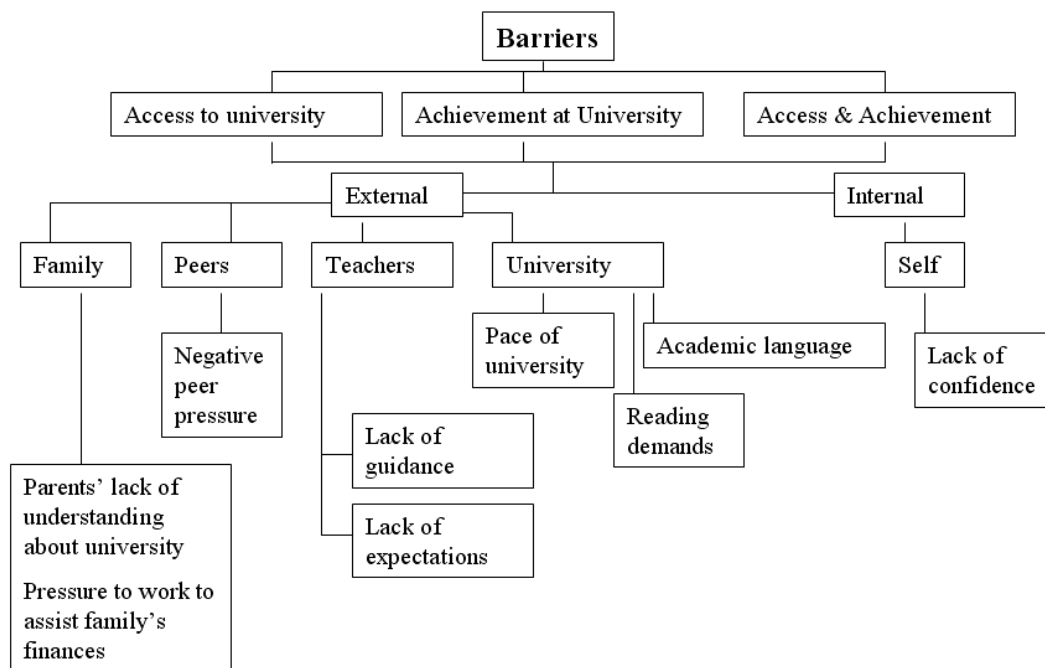


Figure 2. Categories of analysis for “barriers” coded from interview data.

Description and discussion of findings

Families

Mele and Shona identified a set of barriers that were similar to those outlined by Scull and Cuthill (2007). For example, cost and financial considerations were noted by both students who recognised their obligations to contribute to family finances. They also acknowledged how economic circumstances constrained aspirations and prohibited access to university, especially when parents did not appreciate the long-term opportunities afforded by higher education:

Polynesians have a lot of big families. So if you're the oldest, you're not going to go to uni. You're going to go to work for the other kids and for your parents. Even if you worked in a factory, that was like you're getting paid big bucks compared with the lifestyle in Samoa. So parents would push kids to go to work after school. They couldn't see the big picture, that getting an education would actually help get more money. (Int. 2, p3, lines 8-12)

However, Shona and Mele were fortunate. Their families were supportive when they aspired to tertiary study. Shona's older sister who had started a similar program was able to assist with advice. In Mele's case, there was no older sibling to assist but her parents were encouraging:

My parents were really like, if you want to be someone you've got to work hard. Education! Education! I swear my parents talked about it all the time, especially my mum. She'd like nail it down. ... They [parents] give me the time, like if I tell them that I have really important assessment that I have to do, my mum especially she'll be like "No, she has to study". (Int. 1, p.6, lines 21-25)

Mele and Shona's achievement was driven by a deep respect for their parents. Hardship and poverty had provided a motivating force for both students to desire education. Mele referred to her mother's lack of opportunity to attend university, saying, 'because she didn't get that chance I feel that I'm going to do it for her and make her proud'. Shona also recognised her parents' inspiration:

I've seen them sacrifice a lot for us. They paved the way for us, and with nothing. They had nothing. Their English was limited. They had no skills. You know, my mum was working two jobs and looking after six kids, and my dad. So there was a lot of things ... so they're inspiring. (Int. 2, p.4, lines 1-4)

Fortunately, Mele and Shona's families were supportive of education and made significant sacrifices to allow them to achieve their goals. However, their peers at high school were a less positive influence.

Peers

Shona believed that the influence of a peer group at school that underachieved academically and lacked aspirations for tertiary study caused her to discount university as an option after leaving school. Similarly, Mele spoke of negative peer pressure. She felt forced to choose between peer-group acceptance and university aspirations. She chose the latter:

I think they just think "Oh, she's chosen to go her different way". Like, I guess it goes back to race sort of thing. Like, they'd be, "She wants to be like, you know, them and not like us". (Int. 1, p. 4, lines 7-9)

In contrast, peers at university provided a bridge to success. In Mele's case, her current friends shared similar aspirations. In addition, Shona had formed a small support network at university:

We've actually got a little group that's, um, about four of us Pacific Islanders that get together. We say, "Oh we don't want to do this. We can't do it." And then we say, "Come on, we can do it." You know, we just motivate each other. We pretty much just moan and groan and then, "Oh we can do it, get back on it, keep trying". (Int. 2, p.16, lines 8-15)

Both Mele and Shona believed that university outreach initiatives that involved Samoan university students and university graduates would raise the aspirations of Samoan students in secondary school. Mele explained, "I know that some Samoan students would be more encouraged if they see one of their own people like, "Oh he's able to. He's Samoan and he went to uni, so I can do it" (Int.1, p. 25, lines 31-33). Shona agreed that this would have changed her own circumstances:

When I was at school I really didn't think of going on to university or to higher education. That never crossed my mind. I thought I'd always just go to work after school. But just having role models, especially Pacific Island role models, that's really positive. (Int. 2, p.2, lines 12-15)

Peers can act in two ways: they either provide support and assist in realising aspiration or they discourage and inhibit aspiration. Both students believed in the necessity of PI role models to facilitate and assist PI students to realise their aspirations.

Teachers

Shona and Mele did not think that all teachers had high expectations for their Samoan students. Mele explained, “They’d see like the reputation that we had, like Samoans had ... Some [teachers], they were all right. Like, some helped but some were like, they [Samoan students] look like they don’t care. Why waste my time?” (Int. 1, p.25, lines 9-11). Mele was able to counteract the negative racial stereotypes due to her leadership role as school captain and was able to connect to teachers on a different and more personalised level, unlike many of the other Samoan and other PI students.

Shona recalled that there was little guidance provided when she was at school:

There was always like a brainy group and us, and not to say that we were dumb because I’ve got a lot of reports that say, you know, she’s got the potential, but if no-one kind of steers you and helps you and guides you and opens your eyes ... for us, it just wasn’t there. You kind of thought that no one kind of cares so uni wasn’t a part of it.” (Int. 2, p.13, lines 13-20)

While some teachers did not seem to care, one particular teacher did show interest. This was Shona’s English teacher who had taken the time to explain why she enjoyed the poem that Shona had written. Neither student could provide further examples of caring teachers. In general, Mele’s and Shona’s reports of their school experiences suggested that many PI students and many teachers failed to recognise each other’s needs.

University context

The university experience for both students was mixed with enthusiasm and a steep learning curve to acquire the necessary academic language to succeed. Importantly, both students had a clear sense of purpose at university and were studying in the degrees that were their first preference. Lizzio (2006) and Krause (2005) have identified ‘sense of purpose’ as a protective factor in first year retention. Furthermore, Mele was relieved that the university environment, unlike the school context, did not stereotype students from specific cultural backgrounds:

We’d have uni open days and I’d be like, “This is so cool, I want to do this”. And it just, it made you feel like they didn’t care about race and stuff. When you went to those open days you didn’t care if they were Samoan or whatever. (Int. 1, p.5, lines 19-24)

At university, the students were challenged by the academic discourse with reading demands noted in particular. They did not feel prepared for the pace of university. Challenges within the university context were sometimes exacerbated by lack of confidence. Shona explained, “Sometimes Pacific Islanders are a bit shy and think they don’t really want to show that they don’t know what they’re talking about” (Int. 2, p.13, lines 35-36). Lack of confidence perhaps influenced her interaction with university lecturers:

I think of them as authoritative figures. Well they are higher, but there’s a lot of students who I see having lunch with their lecturers and like friends, like an adult to an adult. And still for me as a Pacific Islander and still at my age, I can’t do that. (Int. 2, p.14, lines 7-11)

Mele and Shona were challenged by some aspects of university life, but utilised the support available. They participated in mentoring programs such as Uni-Key⁴, formed study groups with peers and sought additional help if necessary. As Shona noted, “Lecturers and tutors want you to pass. They’re not trying to trip you up” (Int. 2, p. 8, lines 16-17). Both students found their first year at university a challenging yet rewarding experience.

Self

Lizzio (2006) suggested that students’ early success in university coursework included resourcefulness, an attribute that he described as “proactively managing the challenges of the university experience” (p.2). Mele and Shona demonstrated resourcefulness. They entered university with aspirations and a clear sense of purpose. In addition, they realised the necessity for communication especially with their parents and partner who, while supportive, did not always understand the demands of university life. Further to this, both Mele and Shona were agentic and persistent. They joined study groups, attended information sessions, were willing to ask questions, actively worked to develop their vocabulary, honed their note-taking skills and acted on feedback from the teaching staff. This type of self-regulatory behaviour has been identified as a strong predictor of early success at university (Krause, 2005). Mele and Shona’s particular attributes allowed them to benefit from a range of helpful resources that the university provided to students. The students’ personal attributes and the university’s support initiatives were mutually reinforcing.

Conclusion

This study shows that barriers to tertiary success for students with a Pacific Islander heritage should not be conceptualised narrowly as features of the first year experience at university. The secondary school experience is also very important as it provides a site where aspirations are either developed or diminished. It is also the place where students achieve skills and attributes that will enable their success at university.

A set of factors operating during the secondary school years provided barriers to PI students’ aspirations and university access. Aspiring to tertiary study and being accepted within one’s peer group should not be considered as mutually exclusive. Both Mele and Shona suggested that the increased presence of positive PI role models in schools would assist students to develop university aspirations. In addition, our findings suggest that unless PI students perceive that teachers hold high expectations for them as learners, many students are unlikely to develop aspirations for higher education. We propose that limited aspirations on the part of students and a lack of high expectations on the part of teachers result from a lack of intercultural understanding on the part of both students and teachers. Cultural distance between students and their teachers may underpin the type of school climate that both Mele and Shona perceived as lacking support. Therefore, ways to enhance intercultural understanding within school settings provide a worthwhile focus for future research.

It is also important for universities to look beyond generic strategies that support students’ first year experience at university to identify specific strategies that bridge success for particular cohorts of low-SES students. In the case of PI students, family support is very important for success at university. Outreach initiatives involving partnerships between

⁴ Uni-Key provides academic and practical transition support to commencing students from identified equity groups. This includes a customised orientation and mentoring for the first semester of first year.

universities and schools will improve access by better informing and engaging PI students and their families. The involvement of PI mentors in equity outreach initiatives to support student aspiration is also recommended.

The challenge remains for universities to work more effectively with low SES schools to assist students in developing aspirations that will be realised, along with the skills and attributes that will enable success. This preliminary study was limited to the experiences of two successful PI students. As such, it should be replicated with a larger sample of PI students and possibly with other NESB cohorts from the low SES group. A longitudinal approach could also be adopted to establish the effects of outreach initiatives involving partnerships between schools and universities. This will ensure an evidence-based approach to equity and diversity initiatives undertaken by universities.

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