

Going to university: Pacific Island migrant perspectives

Underlying factors constraining access to higher education for young people from low socio-economic backgrounds in Australia: Pacific Island migrant perspectives

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Despite extensive and on-going efforts, people from a low socio-economic background continue to be significantly under-represented in Australian higher education. In response to this situation, a two year action research project explored the broad issue of higher education access for young people from low socio-economic backgrounds in South East Queensland, Australia. This paper focuses on one specific aspect of that project, and reports on the underlying factors which constrain access to higher education access for one cultural community in Australia. Analysis is based on interview data from young people and parents from this community, and presents a rich description of their lived experiences. Enhanced understanding of the perspectives of young people and their families relating to higher education access provides a solid foundation for developing informed and culturally appropriate higher education access initiatives.

Introduction

In recent years large numbers of Pacific Island migrants have moved to the South East Queensland region in Australia. However, the precise number of migrants in the region is unclear. Given that many of Pacific Island migrants arrive in Australia via New Zealand, they may be reflected in the data as New Zealanders, with no further indication of ethnicity. As a result of this, it is widely believed that official statistics for the region vastly under-represent the true number of migrants from a Pacific Island background. However, it is believed that the population could total about 70,000 people.

In common with other migrant groups, this somewhat disparate Pacific Islands 'community' faces many settlement challenges. Of specific interest to this paper, are concerns as regards the educational outcomes of young people from this cultural community (Scull & Cuthill 2010, 2008, 2008a; Moreton Pacific Island Reference Group 2007; Mafi 2005). These concerns have direct relevance to the Australian national agenda relating to higher education access for students from low socio-economic (SES) backgrounds (Department of Employment Education & Training 1990; Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales 2008).

Despite considerable equity, outreach and access efforts during the past twenty years there has been ongoing under-representation of students from low SES backgrounds in higher education in Australia (James, Baldwin, Coates, Krause & McInnis 2004; Coates & Krause 2005; Ferrier 2006; Postle, Batorowicz, Bull, Clarke, McCann & Skula 1997). Based on analysis of students from a diverse range of schools, Dobson and Skuja (2005) argue that this under-representation of people from a low SES background is clearly not a reflection of their ability, but rather a function of a set of interrelated factors which constrain access to higher education (Slack 2003; Young 2004).

Factors which have been discussed include the economic cost of higher education (Andrews 1999), lack of appropriate support networks (Harvey-Beavis & Robinson 2000), limited family experience with or understanding of higher education (Young 2004), and low 'aspiration' - where many people from low SES backgrounds do not include higher education as part of their cultural world view (Marks, McMillan & Hillman 2001). The issue of equitable access to higher education is not specific to Australia, and is reflected in many overseas settings (e.g. Walpole 2003; Andrews 1999; Behnke, Piercy, & Diversi 2004; Tikly 2005; Blanden & Machin 2004; Abbas 2002; Cooke, Barkham, Audlin, Bradley & Davey 2004; Haque 2000; Hannah 1999).

Research context

This paper draws from data collected during a two year study focusing on Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CaLD) communities living in an area of socio-economic disadvantage, the Inala-Ipswich 'corridor' in South East Queensland. The broad study looked to explore:

- The attitudes, understanding, expectations and aspirations of potential students and their families from CaLD communities to higher education; and
- Innovative approaches for immersing outreach activities into CaLD communities, to establish appropriate processes whereby these groups, with university assistance, will be able to identify, nurture and support potential students to continue to higher education.

The research adopted a community-based participatory action research approach using primarily qualitative data collection methods, including informal stakeholder meetings, semi-structured interviews,

workshops, working groups, field notes and observational data (Cuthill 2010; Minkler & Wallerstein 2003). The research design involved three main stages, 1) a preliminary scan, 2) primary data collection, analysis and triangulation of diverse data sources, and 3) development of collaborative responses to identified issues (for description of the broader project see Scull & Cuthill 2010).

The preliminary scan, working with a range of CaLD communities in the 'corridor', identified Pacific Island migrants as experiencing difficulties in accessing higher education, and subsequent research was implemented in collaboration with this cultural community. People from a Pacific Island background may come from many countries across the Pacific regions of Polynesia, Melanesia and Micronesia, each of which has its own unique culture. Within this paper the term 'Pacific Island' is used broadly to refer to people of Polynesian descent. The action research worked primarily with the Tongan and Samoan communities in South East Queensland.

One Tongan and one Samoan community researcher were employed for 18 months to support implementation of culturally appropriate fieldwork within the Pacific Island communities. Both community researchers received introductory training in research methods with a specific focus on interview methods. Their work was directly supported by the project's research manager. One component of the extensive data collection undertaken for the meta-project involved interviews with young people and parents from the Pacific Island community (Israel, Eng, Schulz & Parker 2005).

Data were collected through twenty-five in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted in English by the Pacific Island community researchers. Separate interview schedules were developed for young people and for parents. Eleven interviews were conducted with young people aged 13-18, six of whom were female and five male. Eight of the young people identified their cultural background as Samoan, one as Samoan/Tongan, three as Tongan and one as Tongan/Australian. Seven mothers and seven fathers (not related to the young people who participated) were also interviewed; seven identified as Samoan, six as Tongan and one as Tongan/Australian. Participants were nominated by the Pacific Island Reference Committee which provided support and direction to the research. Interview questions explored five key areas: participant aspirations, attitudes, understanding, expectations and perceived barriers to education. Data

were thematically sorted under these five key areas, and a secondary analysis on responses relating to constraints was undertaken.

The specific focus here, working from interview data, is to provide rich description drawn from the lived experiences of these young people and their parents, of what they see as the underlying factors constraining their access to higher education. Identification of these factors provides an informed and empathetic basis for better understanding of this issue within one migrant community setting. However, it is likely that some of the factors discussed here will be common to other migrant or refugee populations (e.g. Bouloukos 2002; Nguyen 2003; Hugo 2004; Abu-Duhou 2006) and therefore might help inform the broader agenda relating to higher education access, equity and outreach, both in Australia and overseas.

This following section of this paper provides an overview of the current school context and post school options for young people from this community. This is followed by presentation of a set of underlying factors, identified through data analysis, that are seen to constrain access to higher education.

Current school context and post school options

Pacific Island parents who participated in interviews acknowledge the important role they play in the education of their children, and indicate that they have high expectations for their children's performance at school. However, parents educated in the Pacific Islands may be limited in levels of support they can provide, as there is a general lack of understanding as to how the Queensland education system works, and more specifically what their young people are learning at school. As one Samoan-educated parent explained,

See, what they are learning right now in school is different from what I learnt in school. When I tell her what I learnt in school they laugh. They think I am dumb or whatever, because they never heard of it. It is so different to what I learnt in Samoa.

Clearly, cultural differences within a school setting can be problematic. Interviewees note that in Samoa and Tonga, responsibility for children's education rests with the school, particularly with teachers, and as a result parents are not closely involved with their chil-

dren's education, as this is not traditionally their place or role. There is also an expectation that teachers will use strong discipline with their students, and parents usually visit the school only if their child is in trouble. As a result, school visits in Australia can have negative connotations for Pacific Island parents.

Other factors might also hinder parental engagement with schools, such as long work hours, lack of confidence or language issues. One parent commented,

I'm scared to go because my English is half-half. If my English is good then I go and see the people. Sometimes they give me forms I can't fill it out, my spelling is half-half.

This parent's identification of low levels of English language and literacy is relevant regarding educational achievement at school, with possible flow-on impact

to English comprehension and literacy skills for young people. Despite apparent high levels of need in the Pacific Islander community, their access to English as a Second Language (ESL) support is limited.

If Pacific Island parents do not engage with the school, this might be interpreted by teachers as a lack of parental interest in their children's education, when this is not necessarily the case. Such cultural mismatch can create challenges for communication between schools and parents. Due to the differences in their upbringing, parents may be unaware of the importance of engaging with their children's school, or the need to prioritise education over other areas of family and community life. One parent described a practical example of this,

Sometimes there's choir practice, and our son wants to stay home and finish off his project or homework or whatever. But because of the commitment we have to the church, we will all go to the choir and he doesn't finish the homework.

Interview participants also refer to possible bias within the Queensland education system where Pacific Island students may be disadvantaged in their learning as a result of different learning styles, relevance and interest in the curriculum, western pedagogies and teachers' [lack of] understanding of Pacific Island students' needs. For example, one interviewee noted that a lack of relevance of the curriculum can create boredom and dissatisfaction among Pacific Island students,

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leading to disengagement from learning, evidenced by absenteeism or disruption in class. Peer pressure can also impact on educational outcomes, as one young person explained,

As for my Samoan friends ... well we all get distracted very easily. I don't know, the teacher would be talking and our minds would wander off somewhere else and we just all like concentrate on something else instead of the teacher. ... Like I wanted to go in classes where I knew most of the Samoans wouldn't be in. I know if I'm in a class with all the Samoans I would fail that class, ... like I would seriously fail it because we would just be talking and laughing and not listening to the teacher.

Despite these challenges, some Pacific Island students do achieve good academic outcomes at school, while more generally they excel in areas such as sport, art, music and dance. Positive outcomes in these extra-curricular pursuits do help build students' self-esteem and confidence, but unfortunately they may be regarded as more important than an academic focus by both students and parents. As a result, the starting point for some school teachers is an assumption that Pacific Island students are talented in terms of the arts and sports, but are unlikely to succeed academically. Such negative stereotypes are seen to be self-reinforcing both within the community and among external groups.

It appears that relatively few young people from a Pacific Island background in the Inala to Ipswich corridor are continuing to university when they finish school. If further study or training is undertaken then Technical and Further Education (TAFE) courses tend to be a preferred option, based on perceptions that these are more accessible, appropriate and/or cheaper. One young person described their views on this,

I don't know, just the word university, it even scares me. It's like you know it's different, it's a higher education compared to TAFE. You might be able to graduate at TAFE and I don't know, TAFE to me just seems, it feels better. It feels like my cup of tea. University, it's like, that's just for lawyers and doctors and for white people. I'm not trying to be mean, but do you know what I mean? I'm like, oh, I just don't feel comfortable.

If a university education is considered at all, it may be regarded as too hard or simply not something that is part of their vision. In particular, interview participants suggest that the cost of university is perceived as being beyond the means of many families, especially those

on low incomes. This perception is underpinned by lack of understanding regarding the range of financial help and assistance that might be available. Prior family involvement in higher education also has an impact, especially when there are few people in the community with university experience.

While interview participants argue that families are trying to support their children in accessing higher education, the current post-school pathway for young Pacific Islanders is to look for work after finishing school, usually to help support their families, and often ending up in unskilled occupations. As one youth worker commented,

I always ask them [young people] are you going to uni or TAFE? And out of a majority of them, they'll say, 'oh we're going to work in McDonalds' or something like that. I think it's a waste.

Another parent reinforced this comment,

The whole lot of them, being Samoan boys, think when you leave school you get a job anywhere ... make the parents happy, that's it.

Interviewees suggest that higher education is well regarded within their community, and plays an important role in obtaining a good job and having a successful life. Several participants highlight the prestige attached to university education, and the status or honour it gives to those who complete it. One commented,

I feel like university gives you an opportunity, it's like a ticket, like if you get to university that's your ticket into wherever you want to go or whatever you want to do.

However, this positive perception isn't necessarily translated into action, as the same interviewee went on to explain,

Some of the kids these days are just, they just don't have the determination or, like they're not really willing to go that far. They just stop at a certain time and think that they can't do it.

It appears that, while educational opportunities are often cited as the reason for migration to Australia, stated aspirations for higher education and the actuality are at times contradictory. While there is strong argument that both parents and young people aspire to higher education, the ability to realise these aspirations seems to be lacking. Many families have no-one with any experience of higher education to provide good information, support and direction to young people. One parent explained,

... if the parents don't have the knowledge about university, or if they don't understand what's around, they don't know how to encourage their children.

Others argue that while the community generally expresses high aspirations, it is unclear whether higher education is genuinely valued, supported and prioritised accordingly by parents, with immediate family needs an overriding concern. One parent explains the appeal of having some immediate extra income when discussing her son's plans after he finishes school,

Yes, maybe I want my son to go to work in the factory, same as the Island people go to work in the factory ... I don't think about the university, only the factory ... because of the money, it comes faster, the money, from work.

While starting work after finishing school appears to be a pragmatic reality for the young people who were interviewed, they did identify specific activities they would like to pursue including music, arts, teaching and sports. In particular, the young men spoke of the lure of a professional sports career, a goal encouraged and supported by parents. One father suggested that,

Every single Polynesian parent that has a son ... the first thing they think of is that their son can get out of the poverty cycle through sport.

There are Pacific Island 'role models' in Australia who are professional sports players. Yet their success is somewhat misleading. While many of the young Pacific Island students are excellent sports men and women, history suggests relatively few will go on to succeed at a professional level, and meanwhile the educational opportunities have been lost. One parent explained her experience,

There are too many examples, particularly in our community, of what happens to kids that don't get a good education. There's a few boys ... they went to a private school on scholarships for sport, and they had the academic opportunities given to them but they didn't make use of it, and now they're all working in factories.

While a small number of sports professionals provide inspiration to these young people, interview participants identify a general lack of role models from Pacific Island backgrounds in Australia. In particular, there are relatively few school teachers or tertiary educated professionals from Pacific Island backgrounds in the study area. By contrast, in New Zealand (where Pacific migration has been occurring for more than 50

years) and where there are high achievers from Pacific Island backgrounds in many different areas of professional life. Some parent interviewees reported having family members who had completed, or were currently undertaking university degrees in New Zealand. However their location meant that they were unlikely to have an impact on young people in the Australian community. As one interviewee explained,

If I was in New Zealand and my children could see that, yes, but ... that wouldn't be positive for my kids unless they were actually involved around their aunts and uncles back in New Zealand.

Immediate income from unskilled employment opportunities were a key focus during interviews, while longer term benefits from higher education were not recognised. Overall, it appears that while higher education is a stated priority within this community the reality is that other requirements, such as supporting family, takes precedence. As such, the current school context and post school options do not suggest that we will see increased numbers of young people from Pacific Island communities in the Inala-Ipswich corridor accessing higher education.

These interrelated contexts provide a cultural and community backdrop which underpins any consideration of higher education access. In addition, an in-depth understanding of the underlying factors which constrain these young people from accessing higher education opportunities is required before culturally appropriate and holistic responses can be developed.

Underlying factors constraining access to higher education

While some Pacific Islanders have been in Australia for 20 years or more, much migration has taken place in the last 5 years. As a result many families are still working to establish themselves. As one interviewee explained,

But when you are newly migrated you have a lot of problems you know. You need to set yourself up, you need to get the children, getting things which are new to you like finance, you know, it's a lot of issues, because we are not used to that kind of thing.

A range of factors relating to their settlement are seen to directly or indirectly impact on higher education access.

For example, many Pacific Island migrants occupy a unique position in Australia, due to their migration status. Migration agreements between Australia and

New Zealand allow people from a Pacific Island background to migrate to Australia via New Zealand, and to settle here as New Zealand citizens. As a result they appear in Census data as New Zealand, rather than their Pacific country of origin, and therefore they are largely invisible in official statistics. This lack of visibility is problematic as such data are used as the basis for funding a range of services, including those provided to new migrants on arrival. Given that Pacific Island communities are in bureaucratic terms largely 'invisible', their needs can easily be overlooked.

Unemployment or lack of job stability, housing affordability, and potential eligibility issues regarding access to settlement services and government benefits, oftentimes lead to financial pressures. If employment is found, it is usually in unskilled and low paid jobs which do little to improve the situation. Further confounding this situation is the difficulty in accessing relevant information, particularly with regards to government-funded services. This can be particularly challenging for migrants with a first language other than English. Lack of access to appropriate information and services means that issues such as intergenerational poverty, community and domestic violence, addiction and health issues, and a disproportionate number of young Pacific Islanders involved with the criminal justice system, are not being responded to in an appropriate and effective manner. The cumulative impact of these related issues, and the resultant financial pressures, means that the key focus for many families is on day to day priorities and survival, rather than longer-term planning.

Young Pacific Island people growing up in an economically disadvantaged environment such as this are fully aware of the financial pressures and may choose to leave school and find work, even if they are doing well at school. Some students work part-time while still at school, and while this is not uncommon in Australian households, it is reported that this work can involve a significant number of hours per week. As a result, there is a lack of time to do homework, and tiredness at school leading to a drop-off in school results. One parent described how,

...most of the parents that I know are struggling, and so the easiest way for them to get money is to send their kids to work. Most of the kids that I know too, they have part time jobs, and those part time jobs end up like five or six days a week So you know, when those part time jobs are there, they don't have time to study.

In addition, homes can at times be quite crowded, with relatives and/or overseas visitors, making it difficult for young people to find appropriate space to do homework. A lack of resources to assist with study including access to computers, the Internet and reference books is also identified. The potential for financial stress is clear, as one participant highlighted,

Like if you say they're going to go and be a doctor you know, that costs thousands, sometimes more than what a house is worth so, if you can afford that. It's hard really, because I'm not in a position where I can afford to you know, if my child wanted to go to uni, then I wouldn't be able to pay ... we'd have to probably double the mortgage on the house, or sell it and everything if she had to go (to university) here.

Interviewees also identify a significant challenge when adjusting to a new cultural context, including a range of unfamiliar governance procedures and service systems. They argue that across Pacific Island nations the culture is strong and proud, and for many it remains as important an aspect of their lives in Australia as it was in their home country. It was explained during interviews that a focus on the collective is fundamental to Pacific Island culture. Of key importance to this collective community are the family and the church. The extended family, including friends and community members, are all tremendously supportive of each other. The sense of duty and support is very evident and includes care for younger siblings, accommodating visitors or newly arrived migrants, or offering financial assistance to the extended family or church.

This is a different world view compared with the stronger focus in Western culture on the individual. However, such responsibility is not regarded as an imposition, but simply a fundamental aspect of Pacific Island culture. One interviewee described this responsibility,

If I have only one dollar in my hand, then one of my family in Tonga rings today and asks me for one dollar, I send him that one dollar, I don't care if I have money or don't have any money. ... because you've got to help the family. You have to help your church. You have to help the people in Tonga.

This generous and supportive view of family and community can create competing priorities for families, due to an extensive range of financial commitments a recently migrated family may have such as rent, loan repayments and petrol. These competing

priorities do impact on educational outcomes, as one parent explained,

Like there may be a relative who's come over from the Islands to here, and is going back next month, so we all put ... some money for them to take back. And leave the kid to miss out on the school uniform or the shoes.

These bonds to an extended family and community are closely aligned with their [predominately] Christian faith and the church.

The church provides a strong foundation for maintaining both culture and community life, and acts as a meeting place within the community. Interview participants suggest that for many people it plays a central part in their lives. As such, churches and the church leaders have an influential role in the lives of their parishioners and the community. However, some participants express concern at the level of influence the church has in the lives of some Pacific Island migrants, noting that commitment to church can draw heavily on family time and finances, which can in turn impact on educational opportunities for young people.

The challenge of adjusting to a new cultural context is also evidenced through conflict of identity. For example, young people may find it difficult to be accepted as Australians due to their appearance, yet they may also have little understanding or affinity for their identity as a Pacific Islander. Issues relating to identity can be exacerbated for young people born in New Zealand, whose parents were born in the Pacific Islands, and then the family has migrated to Australia. The pressure to understand, respect and come to terms with fundamentally different cultures is challenging for both parents and young people. However, interview participants argue strongly that it is important to achieve some balance between Pacific Island and Australian culture, and between old and new values.

Interview participants identify intergenerational conflict as one outcome resulting from the pressures of cultural adjustment. Exposure to 'new' western values and societal norms encourage young people to challenge the traditional Pacific Island parenting role. Poor communication can also contribute to this intergenerational conflict, especially when English is a second language for the parents and a first language for

the young people. Conflict arising from different cultural frameworks and poor communication, together with a wide range of other pressures, may mean young people simply choose to leave home. A breakdown in authority challenges Pacific Island parents who have been brought up in a much stricter disciplinary environment. One father outlined the problems he has experienced,

I would like my daughter to go to school, it is the reason why I came to Australia ... but now they are free to choose what they want to do. If I force her to go to school, maybe I punish her and the government would lock me up, take me to the prison. But I don't want to force her to do anything, because I'm scared of the government.

Conclusions

This paper presents Pacific Island perspectives on migrant settlement issues, with a specific focus on how settlement issues impact on access to higher education for young people from

this cultural community in the Inala-Ipswich corridor in South East Queensland. These young people undoubtedly face a complex set of interrelated factors which impact on their education and life choices.

These factors broadly relate

to school engagement and achievement, migration status, financial pressures, lack of understanding of the Australian higher education system, cultural differences, and lack of role models. It is suggested that any moves to address higher education access issues will need to recognise and better understand these underlying factors. In summary, five key points are noted.

First, it is clear from participant's responses that access to appropriate and relevant information is an important requirement for navigating a new cultural landscape, and enhanced information systems are required to support migrant settlement processes. In particular, information needs are seen to underpin each of the underlying factors discussed in this paper which are argued to constrain access to higher education.

For example, there are currently various misconceptions regards costs of Australian higher education, clear difficulties in obtaining relevant information, and current methods of dissemination are often inappropriate

If I have only one dollar in my hand, then one of my family in Tonga rings today and asks me for one dollar, I send him that one dollar, I don't care if I have money or don't have any money. ... because you've got to help the family.

for Pacific Island community members. There is a lack of awareness about the full range of post-school education options, and information is not reaching those who require it. In addition, low levels of awareness about university study, among Pacific Island parents and young people, means that it is often not even considered as a realistic option.

Second, parents are seen as key stakeholders, but were somewhat constrained in their ability to support higher education access opportunities for young people. Capacity-building initiatives, which help parents to better support their children's education opportunities, would be a positive response. Such initiatives might include exploring how parents can better engage with schools, increasing parental understanding of educational pathways and raising awareness of education support systems - all of these have the potential to improve higher education access.

Third, in developing more holistic and inclusive responses to address identified higher education access issues, consideration might be given to how the diverse set of stakeholders, including schools, community groups, government agencies, churches and universities might work better together to achieve better education outcomes for Pacific Island children. If this collaboration is to be effective, there is a need to develop a shared understanding of all stakeholder perspectives and needs. Cultural respect and knowledge exchange must be approached as a two-way process between all those groups who have a concern with this topic. For example, while Pacific Island parents learn about the differences between their country of origin and the Queensland education system, schools can increase their understanding of the cultural background of the students they teach, and their specific needs. Such outcomes can be achieved through facilitated dialogue, if both groups are genuine in their intent.

Fourth, while it has been suggested in the literature that financial issues have limited impact on the decision to participate in higher education due to the availability of income-contingent loans, this view overlooks that proportion of the population who are domestic students but not Australian citizens, and who are therefore required to pay fees before commencing study. For people from a low SES community this presents a major obstacle. Low levels of awareness surrounding the availability of such loans and the need for Australian citizenship to be eligible to apply are therefore key issues to address.

Fifth, clearly there is potential for the cultural differences between Australian and Pacific Island societies to result in confusion among young people, particularly with regards to their sense of belonging, identity, self-belief and esteem. There is some indication that young people feel trapped between two cultures. The competing priorities they experience between school, family, peers, church, community and sporting commitments, is also seen to further confound their self perception. There is an urgent necessity, within the broader national discussion on education outcomes, not to lose the focus on these young people. Their needs, the pressures they are facing and their opportunity to contribute to Australian society must always be seen as a priority within this discussion.

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