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## He Manu Hou: The Transition of Māori Students into Māori Studies

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## Abstract

There are many known factors that can help or hinder Indigenous students undertaking tertiary study, but little is known about how Māori students experience Māori studies courses specifically. Against the backdrop of low Māori student retention in universities and the short history of Māori studies as a field of study, this article shares findings from a thematic analysis of interviews with Māori students in Māori studies. It proposes a framework, *Te Ara Mātauranga*, which organises new findings about Māori cultural enclaves, aspirations, engagement, learning opportunities, and support. Ultimately, this article distinguishes the experiences of Māori students in Māori studies from previous generic research about Māori students in tertiary education and identifies a set of consequential challenges and opportunities.

## Keywords

Māori students, Māori studies, university transition, Indigenous student retention

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*He manu hou ahau he pī ka rere.* In 1983, Professor of Māori studies at Victoria University of Wellington (VUW), Hirini Moko Mead, cited this *whakatauki* (Māori<sup>1</sup> proverb) to liken the development of Māori studies in New Zealand universities to a fledgling bird that has just learnt to fly (Mead, 1983, p. 349). Thirty years later, this article reports on the behaviours and beliefs of Māori students as they transition into the Māori studies programme at one New Zealand university and identifies the factors that help or hinder their success. Firstly, though, it considers the broader contexts of Māori student participation in higher education in New Zealand and the history and focus of Māori studies as a field of academic study.

### Māori Participation in Higher Education

The *New Zealand Tertiary Education Strategy 2010 - 2015* called for providers to “improve progression to, and achievement at, higher levels” (Tertiary Education Commission, 2010, p. 12) for Māori students. Māori people make up 15.4% of the total New Zealand population of 4.4 million and 414,000 are of working age (Statistics New Zealand, 2012). Despite a steady increase in Māori participation in tertiary studies in recent years, by 2011 only 14% of the tertiary qualifications completed by Māori were at the degree level or above, compared to 39% for Europeans<sup>2</sup> (Ministry of Education, 2012).

While the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) sets national goals, each university is required to devise its own Māori-related objectives (see for example AUT University, 2011; Massey University, 2003; University of Auckland, 2005; University of Waikato, 2010). In 2011, the 1,940 students who identified themselves as Māori made up 9.7% of Victoria University of Wellington's total enrolments (Victoria University of Wellington, 2012). Victoria University of Wellington's Strategic Plan declared a commitment to “Māori student recruitment, retention, and achievement” to “the contribution of mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge) to scholarship across disciplines” and to “the contribution of te reo Māori [Māori language] and tikanga Māori [Māori culture] to the culture of Victoria” (Victoria University of Wellington, 2009, pp. 3 - 4). Thus, within the broader university environment a connection has been drawn between the goal to increase Māori student degree completions and the provision of a culturally responsive university environment and experience.

### The Evolution of Māori Studies

The field of Māori studies emerged in New Zealand universities with the intention to provide space, both physical and intellectual, to study, practice, and protect Māori cultural ideas and values (Reilly, 2011). Mead (1983) explained that Māori studies is “more than a university subject area” (p. 348) and goes beyond the transmission of knowledge to include the survival of the Māori people. Since their inception, Māori studies programmes have generally offered two strands of courses: Māori

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<sup>1</sup>Māori are the Indigenous people of New Zealand.

<sup>2</sup>The Ministry of Education used the term “European” in this report to denote students who were not of Māori, Pacific, or Asian origin, or classed as “Other.”

language and Māori culture, with some relatively minor variation<sup>3</sup> (Mead, 1983; Reilly, 2011). C. W. Smith (2000) noted that Māori studies is also embedded with philosophy but that “it tends to be interwoven into the curriculum rather than seen as a separate subject” (p. 43). In addition, over time, most Māori studies curricula have evolved to include comparative Indigenous perspectives and histories. The challenge that remains for those working in Māori studies, however, is how best to impart Māori knowledge, “discover new and more effective ways of teaching Maori” (Mead, 1983, p. 341) and produce quality Māori graduates.

## Literature Review

To date, there is no comprehensive published account of the experience of Māori students enrolled in a Māori studies degree program in a New Zealand university. The last 20 years, however, have seen an increase in the number of publications about the transition of Māori students into university study and the factors that may impact on their success (e.g., Gorinski & Abernethy, 2007; Jefferies, 1997; McKenzie, 2005). In addition, limited research has been completed about the experiences of Māori university students in other disciplines, such as accounting and psychology (Bennett, 2003; Gallhofer, Haslam, Nam Kim, & Mariu, 1999). Collectively, they suggest a multitude of factors that can impact on Māori student transition, particularly relating to student characteristics, the university environment, relationships, and teaching pedagogy and practice. Many of these factors have been echoed in international research about other Indigenous students in higher education (Champagne & Stauss, 2002).

### Characteristics of Māori Students

While researchers have decried the deficit approach that labels Māori cultural norms and values as hindrances (Bishop & Glynn, 1999; Gorinski & Abernethy, 2007; Hunt, Morgan, & Teddy, 2001), it has been suggested in some research literature that Māori university students may have distinctive characteristics that act as barriers to their academic success. Jefferies (1997) reported that these characteristics may include low self-esteem, low expectations, a propensity to become distracted by political activities, and a sensitivity to criticism. Hunt et al. (2001) noted how the Māori cultural concept of *whakamā* (shame) can keep Māori psychology students from seeking help and actively participating in their studies.

Alongside these factors, some authors have suggested Māori cultural obligations act as barriers to Māori academic success. For example, a high degree of *whānau* (family) connectedness and responsibility has been found to increase the likelihood of Māori tertiary attrition (Hunt et al., 2001; Jefferies, 1997; T. Smith, 2012). Also, Māori are often first-generation university students, which is believed to place even more significance on, and present additional challenges to, their leaving home to pursue academic qualifications (Gallhofer et al., 1999; Jefferies, 1997; Nikora, Levy, Henry, & Whangapirita, 2002).

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<sup>3</sup>Māori studies were first offered as an undergraduate subject at the University of Auckland in 1952. It was later established at Victoria University of Wellington in 1965, the University of Waikato in 1970, Massey University in 1971, the University of Canterbury in 1974, and the University of Otago in 1981. More recently, Lincoln University has offered Māori studies as a minor and AUT University teaches it under the subject heading “Māori Development” (Reilly, 2011).

Some Māori students believed that they needed to assimilate in order to achieve at university (Jefferies, 1997; Nikora et al., 2002) or try to adopt a “bicultural” approach (T. Smith, 2012). Similar to the “racelessness” phenomenon that was also found among Black students in the United States (Fordham, 1988) and pressures on Indigenous Australian students to assimilate to Australian universities (Bourke & Bourke, 2002), the negative stereotyping of perceived cultural traits can lead to a reluctance to be identified as Māori for fear of marginalisation and a reluctance to use targeted Māori support programmes (Gorinski & Abernethy, 2007).

Some Māori students have expressed a reluctance to forgo their cultural beliefs in order to “fit in” to the university environment (Egege & Kutieleh, 2004). Similarly, researchers have looked for ways in which Māori cultural identity can benefit university study (Bishop, Berryman, Cavanagh, & Teddy, 2007; Gavala & Flett, 2005; McMurchy-Pilkington, 2009). Bennett (2003) found a significant correlation between having a strong Māori cultural identity and the likelihood of success at university. He concluded that “cultural identity moderates the effect of student problems on academic achievement” (p. 57), possibly because of a higher level of “resilience to the difficulties that academic life presents” (p. 62). Jefferies (1997) also noted that Māori students are often drawn to university study by a motivation to learn *te reo* (the Māori language) and *kaupapa Māori* (Māori ways of knowing and doing).

### Characteristics of the University Environment

Some studies have shifted away from a deficit approach to Māori students and instead have focused on the shortcomings of educational institutions (see for example Bishop & Glynn, 1999; Gorinski & Abernethy, 2007). Researchers advocate the adoption of culturally specific spaces and learning support programmes to help Māori students to transition into the university environment (Adds, Hall, Higgins, & Higgins, 2011; Coxhead, 2006; Trafford, 2003). Gallhofer et al. (1999) found a lack of Māori-focused support services and low numbers of Māori academic role models. T. Smith (2012) and Jefferies (1997) found a lack of quality course and enrolment information. McKenzie (2005) recommended centralised Māori support units and increased pastoral care. Furthermore, Jefferies (1997) highlighted the instrumental role that affirmative action policies had played in increasing the disciplinary range and number of Māori tertiary students.

A common environmental barrier for Māori university students cited in the literature was lack of finances (Gallhofer et al., 1999; T. Smith, 2012). Tumen, Shulruf, and Hattie (2008) found that the characteristics of Māori first- and second-year drop-outs were unlike any other ethnic group and concluded that “financial obstacles or other commitments unrelated to their educational experiences might explain why Māori students leave” (p. 238). One study identified fear of financial pressure as a deterrent to university enrolment for Māori secondary school students (Jefferies, 1997), while others indicated that high student debt levels were linked to Māori non-completion rates (Nikora et al., 2002). A number of studies also linked financial stress with family responsibilities and suggested that these combined external obstacles often led to reticence to enrol and/or academic failure (Hunt et al., 2001; Jefferies, 1997; Tumen et al., 2008).

A further theme that featured strongly across the literature was the barrier caused by racism and marginalisation. Hunt et al. (2001) reported that Māori students in their study had found the “monocultural environment” to be alienating (p. 25). Similarly, students in another study reported feeling “very lonely” due to their uncertainty and isolation (Gallhofer et al., 1999, p. 786). Gorinski and Abernethy (2007) also found that the university environment projected low expectations on to

Māori students, which were often self-fulfilling. In Jefferies' (1997) study, the Māori students were asked to identify a range of environment-related barriers: Racism and intimidation featured prominently, a finding reinforced in Canadian, American, and Australian research with other Indigenous and minority student cohorts (Augoustinos, Tuffin, & Sale, 1999; Simpson, 2002; Sonna, Bishop, & Humphries, 2000; Tierney, 1999).

### **Characteristics of Relationships with Students**

Once at university, a key success factor mentioned in almost all of the literature was the importance for Māori students of *whanaungatanga* or relationships (Bishop et al., 2007; Chinlund & Hall, 2010; Earle, 2008; Hawk, Cowley, Hill, & Sutherland, 2002; McMurchy-Pilkington, 2009; White, Oxenham, Tahana, Williams, & Matthews, 2009). The challenge for universities was recognising this aspect and building the requisite organisational capacity (Gorinski & Abernethy, 2007; Syron & McLaughlin, 2010). Some have suggested that the students need to form relationships has a cultural basis, which is linked to “a very powerful tendency and preference for mixing with other Māori” (Jefferies, 1997, p. 78). Others emphasise that university study puts pressure on traditional whānau support relationships, so the development of new connections with others becomes critical for Māori success (Nikora et al., 2002).

The most critical relationships for Māori students, according to the literature, were with staff. In many instances, Māori staff were described as important role models whom Māori students were more comfortable in approaching (Gallhofer et al., 1999; Jefferies, 1997). This was found to ease the transition of Māori students into the unfamiliar university environment (T. Smith, 2012), lead to higher levels of Māori student motivation and participation (Hawk et al., 2002) and, ultimately, greater retention (Gorinski & Abernethy, 2007).

Also deemed very important were the relationships that Māori students formed with each other (Clark, 2006; Gorinski & Abernethy, 2007), with varying outcomes. Some positive peer relationships were found to form during academic activities, such as targeted Māori student tutorials (Hunt et al., 2001). In contrast, if they “hang with the wrong crowd”, peer pressure was found to have a negative impact on Māori student success (Jefferies, 1997, p. 76).

### **Characteristics of Teaching Pedagogy and Practice**

The student transition literature about Māori and other Indigenous students also suggested that culturally responsive teaching practice is likely to engage and retain more students in tertiary study (Hall, 2011; Nakata, Nakata, & Chin, 2008; Norman, 2004; Page & Asmar, 2008; Simpson, 2002; Zepke & Leach, 2005). The literature recommended that teaching staff should engage in inclusive practice and that non-Māori teachers in particular needed to achieve “cultural congruence” (Jefferies, 1997, p. 82). One study reported how Western approaches to learning and disciplinary knowledge were often inconsistent with Māori values (Gallhofer et al., 1999). Researchers also found that Māori students “need to see themselves reflected in the curriculum” in order to engage with a course of study and suggested that staff undertake professional development about learning styles and discursive pedagogical practice (Gorinski & Abernethy, 2007). Effective teachers of Māori students were found to have “incorporated relevant experiences into educational activities, encouraged students to talk in their first language and enjoyed learning from their students about their culture” (Hawk et al., 2002, p. 6).

A number of studies found a lack of Māori material in tertiary courses (Gallhofer et al., 1999; Hunt et al., 2001; Jefferies, 1997). When Māori content was taught, researchers found that it was often in isolation, delivered by the few Māori academics on staff, and not offered cohesively across the academic programme (Gallhofer et al., 1999). In contrast, when the Māori content in courses increased and Māori-specific learning opportunities (such as targeted tutorials) were offered, they contributed to Māori student success (Hunt et al., 2001).

The demeanour of teachers also impacted on Māori tertiary student engagement. In one study, Māori students reported how there are “too many teachers who do not understand the needs of Māori students”, “are racist”, and “have low expectations of Māori” (Jefferies, 1997, pp. 135 - 136). Positive reinforcement of Māori students from teaching staff and the setting of high expectations were found to be critical elements of effective teaching pedagogy (Gorinski & Abernethy, 2007; Jefferies, 1997).

### Project Overview

Against this backdrop, a project was developed at Te Kawa a Māui (TKaM), the School of Māori Studies at VUW, to identify the factors that help or hinder Māori students undertaking Māori studies courses. It was prompted by a TEC edict for New Zealand universities to ensure that Māori student completion rates were on par with overall student completion rates by 2018. At VUW in 2011, the overall student course completion rate was 84%, whereas it was 77% for Māori students. In comparison, completion rates for Māori students in TKaM courses were varied and ranged from 25% to 88%, with only two courses achieving completion rates above the 84% threshold (Victoria University of Wellington, 2011). As the programme with the largest cohort of Māori students within VUW, it was important to investigate why there was such a disparity in Māori student performance. Ultimately, this project was about identifying any elements that distinguished the experience of Māori students in Māori studies from Māori students in other tertiary programmes, with a view to utilising that information to increase Māori student completion rates in TKaM.

### Method

An advisory panel of TKaM staff was established to direct the project and Māori research assistants were recruited to conduct interviews and assist with the research. Ethical approval was also obtained from VUW's Human Ethics Committee.

Interviews were held with 10 Māori students (7 female) from TKaM who were identified by staff to represent differing levels of academic performance and engagement. The participants consisted of seven undergraduate students, two graduate students, and one postgraduate (master's) student. A semi-structured interview schedule was followed. Students were asked about their experiences of TKaM and VUW more broadly. They were also asked about the factors that facilitated and inhibited their academic achievement. The interviews were digitally recorded and later transcribed and coded using NVivo software. The interview data was subjected to an inductive thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), in which data were coded into basic elements of meaning and then organised into higher-level themes. Major themes were assessed to ensure that (a) they were indicated by multiple extracts, (b) there was consistency between extracts within overarching themes, and (c) there was distinctiveness between extracts across major themes. The major themes were then arranged into an overarching framework for promoting Māori academic achievement within Māori studies.

## Results – Te Ara Mātauranga

Four major themes emerged from the interview data in relation to the way that Māori students experienced studying within Māori studies: (a) their aspirations, (b) their ways of engaging, (c) the learning opportunities that they encounter, and (d) the support they receive. Māori cultural enclaves were found to assuage each of these elements. A distinct feature of the Māori studies interviewees was that they drew clear distinctions between “mainstream” or “Western” cultural spaces and Māori cultural spaces that exist in pockets within the university environment, such as TKaM, VUW’s Māori meeting house complex called Te Herenga Waka Marae (the marae), a Māori student mentoring programme called Te Pūtahi Atawhai, and the Whānau House (Māori student accommodation). The interviewees described engaging most strongly with the Māori cultural enclaves, where Māori worldviews were dominant.

The four major themes were organised into a framework entitled *Te Ara Mātauranga* (Māori Knowledge Pathway). The framework describes Māori student academic progression within a Māori studies department, and shows student progression through “Aspirations”, “Engagement”, “Learning Opportunities”, and “Support”. A discussion of the major themes, supported by extracts from the interview data, is presented below.

### Aspirations

The first major theme, Aspirations, relates to how the expectations and aspirations held by Māori students in Māori studies, and those around them, influence their decision to pursue and succeed in tertiary education. In line with previous literature, their expectations were influenced by whānau and secondary school experiences (Jefferies, 1997). However, their aspirations to succeed in Māori studies were found to centre on cultural and *iwi* (tribal) goals.

A number of participants described being the first in their family to attend university, which is similar to earlier research findings (Gorinski & Abernethy, 2007; Jefferies, 1997), and having to overcome negativity and family expectations, as the following quotes attest:

Although I knew I wanted to go to university, my immediate family, my parents and siblings, wanted me to leave school and go working. (P3)

I am the first in my family to come to university. My parents are proud. You get pressure, you know. It all builds up, and you don’t want to tell them about bad things and marks. (P8)

However, in addition to overcoming expectations about university study in general, participants described having to overcome negativity around their enrolment in Māori studies in particular. One participant with limited prior Māori cultural engagement described her grandmother’s response to her choice of studies:

I think she was a bit surprised that I was getting into the Māori stuff. (P7)

Despite the renaissance in Māori culture that has been in effect for the past four to five decades (Moon, 2009), it seems from the quote above that Māori who swim against the broader tide of assimilation into mainstream culture might still be met with “surprise”.



Participants also described negative perceptions surrounding the value of a Māori studies degree, as follows:

I know there aren't many jobs out there right now. And people still think, "Why are you doing Māori studies? What will that give you?" (P8)

The negative attitudes towards Māori studies suggested within the excerpt above conform to colonial discourses locating Indigenous languages and cultures as static remnants of the past of little relevance today (L. T. Smith, 1999) and deny current demand in the labour market for graduates with an understanding of Māori language and culture, which is driven, in no small part, by the burgeoning Māori economy.

Many participants were motivated to pursue Māori studies due to cultural aspirations. In the following excerpts, a participant described her desire to promote *te reo Māori* and cultural connectedness within her whānau:

My main reason for learning it and speaking it is for my babies ... I just want to know my reo all over again. I want to remember being - be able to kōrero [speak Māori] to my parents. (P1)

Participants also noted that their decision to choose Māori studies was motivated by their aspirations to contribute to their iwi, as the following two participants described when asked about their post-study plans:

Make the iwi and whānau more involved together and help the *rangatahi* [youth] into tertiary education, even if it's training to get a job. I have to work out a proposal for the iwi, though I've never really been a part of my iwi, even though Granny was. (P4)

The topics I'm studying are topical right now for post Treaty settlements. What I have wanted is to go to work with my iwi. (P6)

Thus, while previous research has suggested that whānau responsibilities increase the likelihood of Māori university student attrition (Hunt et al., 2001; Jefferies, 1997; T. Smith, 2012), the preceding quotes suggest that whānau responsibilities might also motivate Māori studies students to complete their studies.

## **Engagement**

The second major theme, Engagement, relates to the places that the participants found people who encouraged them to stay connected and focussed on Māori studies.

The *marae* was popular with most participants. Participants described a deep sense of connectedness with the facility and marae community, as the following quote expressed:

I love the marae here. It's the only thing that makes me feel good about being here in Wellington in the concrete jungle ... Because there's this marae here I don't feel like I'm in some alien place. I feel relaxed. Not in a strange environment. (P6)

Notably, for some participants, their connectedness with the marae pre-dated their university enrolment and encouraged their interest in Māori studies, as the following excerpts described:

I was a little girl here when they were building the marae. My father was a student here and I was a little girl running around. And I did a little *mahi* [work] here. I helped with some of the work on the panelling. So yeah I do feel that connection. (P6)

I already had a small connection with the marae. It's the reason I chose to come through Māori studies. (P1)

In addition to the marae, participants described feeling connected to the Māori studies programme, as explained in the following quote:

You feel you're with people who have similar lives, values, experiences. (P6)

A source of engagement within the Māori studies programme for some participants was the Tohu Māoritanga (Diploma in Māori Studies), as this participant explained:

That first trimester we all met and all moved together, and we had [the coordinator] who is amazing. And he was always there for us, helping us. (P2)

The importance of having access to Māori cultural enclaves within and around the Māori studies programme that affirm Māori identity and enable Māori cultural expression was also asserted:

The environment matters as well. Being allowed to be Māori, in a Māori environment. It matters a lot. (P1)

This finding was consistent with previous research results that suggest students who are members of cultural minorities are reluctant to forgo their cultural beliefs to conform to the mainstream university cultural setting (Egege & Kutieleh, 2004).

### **Learning Opportunities**

The third major theme was Learning Opportunities. Many participants described going to university as an opportunity to acquire Māori knowledge without the curricula limitations of other programmes noted in earlier research (Gallhofer et al., 1999; Hunt et al., 2001; Jefferies, 1997). TKaM and its surrounding cultural enclaves were seen by interviewees as the place to gain Māori knowledge. However, a notable distinction for the Māori studies students was the diversity of their prior knowledge and experiences. Some Māori students entered Māori studies with very limited prior exposure to Māori knowledge and culture, while others entered with a wealth of knowledge and experience on which to draw. This presented additional challenges, which were met through the careful pitching of Māori studies courses.

Many participants noted their limited exposure to Māori knowledge at secondary school or in their families:

I went to mainstream [schooling] and didn't start learning 'til here. Mum and Dad don't speak the reo. (P4)

Limited prior exposure to Māori knowledge and culture meant that learning in Māori studies could be intimidating, as the following quote demonstrates:

My brother and sister attended for one semester. Then they felt intimidated by the others in their classes ... They were worried that people knew more than them. They thought they knew a lot when they first started. But as soon as they started learning stuff, they knew less than what they thought. (P1)

Another participant described how she was initially intimidated but had eventually developed Māori cultural competence through her experiences in Māori cultural enclaves at university and developed a strong sense of Māori identity over time:

In my first year, I remember coming for the *pōwhiri* [Māori ceremonial welcome]. It was my first *pōwhiri* ... I was never brought up with it. We lost our *reo*, and our ties to our *marae*. I remember being a little intimidated ... I remember thinking wow, a sense of belonging. You kinda get to see all those faces and as the years progress you get to know them ... I now feel confident on a *marae*. I feel at home. I know what goes on, the protocol and why ... I'm glad I chose Māori studies. I've met some great people and I'm now proud to say I'm part Māori. It's been instrumental in who I am today and I'm proud to be both Māori and *Pākehā* [New Zealander of European descent]. (P8)

While previous research has shown that strong Māori cultural identity predicts university academic success (Bennett, 2003), in the case of Māori studies, it appears that the strong Māori cultural identity of the students may need time to develop and that the learning opportunities afforded by the program may facilitate that development.

For one participant, her extensive prior Māori knowledge meant she felt that courses were not pitched at the right level for her:

I don't know if it's just me, but I think some of them are easy. But that's cos I've been brought up a bit more Māori than others. I see things differently than other people. (P9)

However, the same participant acknowledged divergence between how she was taught the Māori language in the past and how it was taught at university:

I wasn't used to uni *reo*. That's why I think I failed. And I don't know what the different grammatical terms are. I learnt Māori when I was young. (P9)

Many of the learning opportunities described by participants took place outside of formal class settings, in Māori cultural enclaves other than TKaM. In the following quote, a participant described learning opportunities at the Whānau House:

Just having conversations. That was it really. It wasn't like we were sitting down and studying together, those particular behaviours. It was just more the *kōrero* [talk] that you have with your peers because we were all Māori so it was just more of a natural sort of thing. (P7)

The marae was also noted for providing abundant learning opportunities, as one participant described learning:

... Just by sitting at the *pae* [orator's bench] and listening to discussions and joining in on discussions. (P5)

In managing student diversity, participants noted that it was important to respect individuals' opinions and affirm their *mana* (esteem). In the following quote, the Māori studies programme is described as offering an environment where students' diverse opinions are respected:

Here there's always debate, its open, no one's wrong everyone's entitled to their own opinions and everyone walks away with their mana intact. (P8)

This finding confirms previous research, which indicated the negative impact of *te whiunga kupu* (the thrown word, i.e. verbal criticism) on the mana and, in turn, the academic success of Māori students (Jefferies, 1997).

**The influence of learning opportunities on aspirations.** Some participants noted how the learning opportunities with which they had been presented at Māori studies contributed to reshaping their aspirations:

The seven years I've been here or it's taken me to get this far [to master's level] ... It's become like some sort of foundation for something else you know. To go on learning... I'm thinking about doing my PhD. (P7)

Another participant described how the learning opportunities in Māori studies had enabled her to rekindle aspirations she had formerly held, and that those renewed aspirations enabled her to overcome challenges and persevere in her studies:

When I went to high school I tried to join the te reo Māori class but I was told I was "White." So when I came to university I decided to pick up a reo paper for me, and now it's my major. Now Māori studies is my major... I failed 111 and 112 over summer, and that set me back a year, but I still pursued it. I remember saying back to myself, "I'm not going to let that 13 year old forget her dream." (P8)

Another participant described the pathway leading from engagement, to learning, to new aspirations as follows:

I picked it up in 101 [a Māori language course] and was hooked, it clicked with me and I felt it was something I wanted to do, especially after finding out about the decline of the language, I just wanted to get involved in the revitalisation. (P4)

While involvement in political activities has been found to distract Māori students from tertiary studies (Jefferies, 1997), the quote above highlights how students' awareness of Māori political issues, such as Māori language revitalisation, can also act as a powerful motivator to continue their studies.

## Support

The fourth major theme that was extracted through thematic analysis was Support. Participants identified a number of challenges that they faced while studying and noted the importance of being able to access support in order to deal with these challenges.

Similar to what was suggested in the research literature (Gallhofer et al., 1999; Jefferies, 1997; Nikora et al., 2002), challenges identified by participants included finances, dealing with psychological stress, and being away from home and family, as the following quotes outline:

When your rent costs the same as the allowance, something's wrong! (P8)

This year I've been angry and sad and stressed. It's more of a personal journey. Its just life and everything has affected my studies. (P2)

Staying away from family. We live twenty metres away from each other, all the whānau on the farm... people think it's weird but I'm used to being around everyone. We're like a village. We're like a *pā* [traditional Māori communal living]. (P9)

Participants also noted the challenges faced by students who lacked academic skills. In the following quotes, participants explained how even though students may have knowledge of the Māori course content, they may lack an understanding of how to approach university study, be unaware of university processes, and may not be used to working independently:

I was used to the reo. Just not the work. (P9)

I still didn't know much about the process of dropping courses, adding courses, all that sort of stuff. So I mean, that affected me ... It wasn't 'til third year that I sort of had a better idea of how things worked. (P3)

... You're pretty much told, "You're an adult. Go off and do it." They don't know how to go off and do it. They're told how to do it, but some of them need more encouragement. (P1)

Faced with these challenges, participants highlighted the importance of having a thorough understanding of the available support services:

Initially when I started, I was lost. I didn't have any support... I didn't know where to go to seek advice. (P3)

In order to receive support, participants explained that students also needed to be comfortable accessing support services. As found in earlier research literature (Jefferies, 1997), the following two quotes demonstrate how Māori students can be reluctant to ask for help from student services:

It was like a very last resort for me. It's a pride thing. (P4)

I found a lot of students at that time were very whakamā, very shy in coming forward and putting their hand up and saying, "Hey, I need help." They'd rather just fail. You know the

number of people I saw walk away from university ... Just because they didn't ask the right question of the right person. (P3)

In line with previous research (Gallhofer et al., 1999; Hunt et al., 2001; Jefferies, 1997; Nikora et al., 2002; T. Smith, 2012; Tumen et al., 2008), participants agreed that a significant source of support during their studies was their peers. Many described establishing study groups with their peers. For example:

The older students were really good at living their experiences so you could learn through them ... We had regular meeting times and it was all for a common cause. (P3)

As was also outlined by Jefferies (1997), the potential negative implications of group study were also noted. In the following excerpt, a participant noted that group study could at times be disruptive, as she compares the voices of those attempting quiet study with the voices of those wishing to socialise as though they were at a "guitar party" (a common form of social gathering involving boisterous singing with guitar accompaniment):

But you get too many of them in the one room, and you've got your guitar voices, and your study voices and they tend to clash. (P1)

Despite the potential for distractions, many participants enjoyed taking a collective approach to study. This preference for collectivism resonates with Nikora and colleagues' (2002) suggestion that Māori students place importance on creating family-like relationships within the university environment. Participants suggested a collective approach to study was a distinguishing feature of their experience of Māori studies, compared with other programmes:

Having experienced both this School [Māori studies] and [another programme], I am so glad I'm done with that major. I didn't enjoy it. Their systems are very hands-off... Here it's about being together, helping each other and being more of a whānau. (P8)

I found those papers outside Te Kawa a Māui ... they were actually just really tough places to be ... The reo papers that I have done and the Māori papers in general that I have done have always been much warmer and much more collective and much more, kind of, collectively based. (P10)

The positive impact of staff who are accessible and have good relationships with students is well documented (Gallhofer et al., 1999; Gorinski & Abernethy, 2007; Hawk et al., 2002; Jefferies, 1997; T. Smith, 2012). In addition to the peer support noted above, participants noted the assistance received from Māori studies staff. For example:

After [child's name] was born, I was doing my last language paper and she ended up being in hospital for a month and Māori studies was really accommodating ... tutors and lecturers this time around have been very supportive, very approachable. (P3)

Other participants noted support from other Māori cultural enclaves on campus, rather than mainstream student services, as the following quote asserts:

The support comes from TPA [mentoring program] and the Marae, who have always been supportive of me. I haven't used the rest of the services like health or careers. (P4)

**The influence of support on aspirations.** Some participants described how the support they received at university influenced their self-belief and aspirations. The influence of staff expectations on Māori students has been described elsewhere (Gorinski & Abernethy, 2007; Hawk et al., 2002; Jefferies, 1997; T. Smith, 2012). In the following excerpt, a participant described how a Māori studies lecturer influenced her self-belief:

[Lecturer] is amazing, how she taught us and encouraged me to believe in myself. (P5)

Finally, the following quote outlines how engagement, learning opportunities, and support could lead to academic success:

I like learning and exploring ideas, and Te Kawa a Māui is a comfortable place to be. I think it's crucial, a support network. All the Māori support networks have helped me complete and succeed. (P6)

## Discussion

This project enabled the construction of *Te Ara Mātauranga* as a framework for understanding and encouraging Māori student achievement in Māori studies. Overall, the positive experiences of Māori students within Māori studies were clear and numerous. Many found the various Māori cultural enclaves provided them with a secure, comfortable learning environment that offered opportunities to not only learn about Māori but to also “be Māori.” The *Te Ara Mātauranga* framework illustrates the influence of Māori cultural enclaves within the university throughout each stage of the academic progression of Māori students in Māori studies and explains the relationships between aspirations, engagement, learning opportunities, and support.

Many of the findings from this study support previous research into Māori and other Indigenous student experiences of tertiary education. However, several findings from this study were inconsistent with previous research and may suggest that Māori students within Māori studies have a unique experience of tertiary education. The interviewees entered into Māori studies for reasons far beyond just academic success or better career prospects – they also held deep cultural aspirations and wanted to connect with their personal heritage, become more connected with whānau, give back to iwi, and advance Māori political causes such as the revitalisation of the Māori language. As some of these aspirations spread into realms outside of academia, they hold the potential to either motivate students to pursue their studies or distract their efforts away from their studies.

As well as having diverse aspirations, interviewees described diverse Māori cultural backgrounds. Their diverse prior educational experiences reportedly created difficulties for Māori studies students - courses could be too easy or too difficult and cause students to disengage from the material. However, many participants described being more engaged in courses offered in the Māori studies programmes than in courses outside of it.

Participants also reported experiencing connectedness to a number of related Māori cultural enclaves throughout the university. It was through these cultural enclaves that participants tended to

seek and receive support for their studies, with some participants reporting reluctance to access mainstream student support services.

The Māori cultural enclaves supported students in a number of ways. For those students with strong Māori cultural backgrounds, enclaves provided spaces where they would not have to assimilate to the dominant culture to fit in. For those students with limited prior Māori cultural exposure, the cultural enclaves provided opportunities to connect with other Māori, develop Māori cultural understanding and competencies, and give expression to their Māori identities.

## **Implications and Applications**

The results of this study suggest that the experiences of Māori students within Māori studies differ from those of students outside of Māori studies. Therefore, strategies to improve Māori student outcomes based on research with Māori students outside of Māori studies may not be appropriate for Māori students within Māori studies departments.

Also, somewhat ironically, while it appears that the combination of positive factors influencing the experiences of Māori students in Māori studies had the effect of retaining students within the TKaM academic programme, it did not necessarily ensure that those students were academically successful. Thus, new strategies are required in areas that present continuing challenges, such as the diversity of the Māori students' prior knowledge, the need to demonstrate Māori cultural knowledge, language proficiency *and* mainstream academic skills in order to be successful in the Māori studies programme, in addition to the negative perceptions around the value of Māori studies as a subject of study.

The results of this research may be limited due to participant characteristics. While efforts were made to invite Māori students who differed in their levels of academic performance and engagement with TKaM, it is possible that those students who chose to take part in the study were more engaged and had more positive experiences of TKaM than those who did not. It is also possible that participants in this study were influenced to give a favourable account of their experiences at TKaM, given that senior students of the School conducted the interviews on school premises. Future research could address this issue by contracting independent researchers to conduct the research.

This study has focused squarely on the experiences of Māori students in Māori studies; however, it has international implications for tertiary education institutions and educators involved in recruiting and retaining Indigenous students. While the specific strategies and factors identified in this study may not be entirely transferable, the overall finding that the experiences and barriers for Māori students in Māori studies were often quite discipline-specific raises the possibility that a similar differentiation could exist for Indigenous students in other Indigenous studies programmes elsewhere in the world.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this research a number of recommendations for Māori studies departments can be put forward:

- Design student service packages, tailored to the unique needs of Māori studies students (e.g., career advice, health and counselling, and academic support).



- Promote student services through the Māori cultural enclaves in which Māori studies students are engaged.
- Structure Māori studies courses to accommodate diverse learning needs and/or design specific courses targeted at specific populations within Māori studies departments (e.g., students who have been through Māori medium primary and secondary education).
- Promote collective learning opportunities (e.g., Māori student study spaces).
- Structure course content to prepare students to fulfil their cultural, whānau connectedness, and political ambitions.

### **Conclusion**

Thirty years after Mead (1983) first described Māori studies as a fledgling bird, it is still too soon to judge whether Māori studies, as an academic field of study, has soared to its academic heights or delved into the great depths of Māori knowledge. It is, however, long enough to be able to examine the experiences of its Māori students and provide a greater understanding of their challenges and opportunities, and particularly their engagement with the Māori cultural enclaves that have developed around Māori studies. Nevertheless, there is a need for further empirical research, particularly quantitative and comparative, to elaborate on these findings and to determine the extent to which they are transferable, both within New Zealand and internationally. In addition, there is also a need for Māori studies academics to publish more on curriculum design and pedagogy within Māori studies and to engage in “the critical and liberating dialogue which is necessary for us to understand our social reality” (Mead, 1983, p. 32).

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