**EVALUATING A TARGETED UNIVERSITY EQUITY INITIATIVE**

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**Abstract**

Given the articulated aim of increasing the numbers of Mäori and Pacific Nation students in tertiary education in New Zealand, findings related to indigenous and minority groups in Australia, New Zealand and the United States of America and the impact of transition programmes, as well as mentoring and skills programmes are relevant when looking at retention of these groups. Victoria University of Wellington has supported targeted Maori and Pasifica tutorials (MPI) particularly for the crucial first year of study based on research that suggests these are an effective mechanism for students by providing a more supportive environment thus enhancing retention as well as learning. This paper discusses how MPI tutorials for first year students work in practice from the point of view of the students and tutors in one faculty. Focus groups, individual interviews and a brief email survey were used to collect the data from MPI students and tutors. The results demonstrated that these tutorials were appreciated by students but that when there was a perception that they were ‘remedial’ students were not interested in attending. Suggestions were made as to how the tutorials and lecture delivery could be improved for the benefit of all concerned..

**Background**

Knowing that attrition is greatest in the first year does not, in itself, tell us what institutions can do during that year to enhance the likelihood of persistence and degree completion. For that we have to know about the different types of learning which arise in the university and the forces which shape those learnings (Tinto, 1995, p.2).

Since the1970s (eg Astin 1975, Tinto1987), there has been considerable research on the first year experience and what actions can be taken during this crucial period to achieve higher retention rates. In his paper Tinto points out that many who leave in their second or third year of university study do so because of their experience in their first year. The cost of withdrawal is considerable for the institution and the tax-payer, and even more so for the student in terms of personal aspirations and self-esteem, quite apart from financial costs and debt. Equal educational opportunity is not simply about affirmative action in relation to admission policies, but about retention strategies to enable students from under-represented groups to complete their courses successfully while further developing their potential and transferable generic skills.

***The North American Experience***

Academic and social support are seen to be the key to retention of minority students and for their overall satisfaction with their experience as students (Hoffman and Lowitzki 2005). Flores, (1994) pointed to the positive outcomes from providing group tutorials for minority students and the negative outcomes when failing to provide a support system or counsellors and teachers with whom students can identify. Kalsner (1991) also emphasised the importance of a social support system for black students to combat the social isolation, cultural alienation, and racial discrimination they experienced which could lead to them dropping out. Further, Dennis et al. (2005) investigated the role of environmental social supports in college outcomes in a longitudinal study of 100 ethnic minority first-generation university students. Finding a correlation between a lack of peer support and lower academic outcomes they suggested:

“The impact of lack of peer support on academic outcomes suggests the value of programs that promote study groups, peer mentoring, or similar services that help students find the support they need to deal with the pressures of college.” (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005, p. 234)

On the other hand:

“Some researchers (Throgmorton, 1999; Tracey & Sedlacek, 1987) have suggested that the key to success for students of colour is finding means to apply academic skills in unfriendly environments... the more foreign the cultural geography of a college or university to a potential student, the more important it is to have a cultural road map.” (Hoffman & Lowitzki, 2005, pp. 467-468)

Chu-Richardson (1990) indicates that Black students have significantly less contact with faculty members than do their peers which is a factor influencing their success. This issue of limited interaction between minority students and staff was highlighted by the Indian Nations At Risk Task Force and the National Advisory Council on Indian Education (1990) when they advocated for more minority faculty and staff, and an extensive mentor programme to deal with the lack of support for Native American college students. And Kemp (1990) argues that minority retention programmes can often be an inadequate response to high attrition levels because they fail to deal with underlying factors such as an adverse institutional climate. for minorities. He also contends that because such programmes are often associated with remedial work, they are a disservice to the many minority students who have acceptable abilities and grades and thus should endeavour to overcome the negative effects of racism.

***The Australian Experience***

The key report on the Australian experience is “The First Year Experience in Australian Universities: Findings from 1994 to 2009” (James et al 2010) which summaries 15 years of national survey data on the academic and social experiences of first year university students. Of particular interest in this case is the finding that students in professional disciplines such as Education, Health and Business are more likely to say that university studies are important for job preparation” (p18)

While students from indigenous backgrounds were more likely to report working consistently through the year in comparison with their peers (p32), all students spend less time on private study and on campus compared to five years ago. However, James et al (2010) suggest that the quality of experience seems to be increasingly positive hence engagement is crucial as it is an important predictor of retention. They suggest the importance of engagement with first years in small groups is the key to engagement with learning and with the university overall (p42) and *indigenous students are significantly more likely to find social networking technologies useful for their learning in the first year* (p47).

***The New Zealand Experience***

Similar themes are noted when discussing Maori and Pacifica students in New Zealand. Reflecting on the philosophy that informs teaching at Te Whare Wananga o Awanuiarangi, Aranga et al. (2008) warn against deficiency thinking when designing an effective indigenous student support model (p7).

Airini et al. (2007) suggest that with Pacifica students as well the facilitation of social interaction, that also includes *relationship development between Pasiﬁka student support staff and general programme lecturers (p50),* assists with the achievement of their learning as *social interaction with peers for support is “natural”* (p50).

During the second semester of 2002, the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Waikato trialled an extra intervention initiative for Maori students undertaking 100 level courses to enhance retention. Evaluations concluded that minority students who are successful can create the necessary *personal, environmental, academic and social supports required to negotiate the tertiary environment* (p 70), and this is a shared responsibility with the institution *facilitating the development of such supports and the creation of an environment that welcomes Maori students* (p 71).

A study exploring the participation and experiences of Maori students in the University of Waikato accountancy programme (Gallohofer et al1999) again highlighted the issues of the university environment and absence of support. Added to the feeling of alienation was a lack of confidence.

...you just don’t feel comfortable asking questions in class because it’s like all eyes are on you sort of thing... you have this perception that they [the Pakeha students] are so much brighter than us, more intelligent... you grow up with these [perceptions].. (p 787).

The department had been offering Maori tutorials for the previous three years *taken by either Maori staff or appropriately qualified students. These tutorials attempt to create an environment which is based on whanau values. All students we talked to have pointed to the experience they had in those tutorials and how helpful they have found them (p 790).*

***VUW Student Experience***

Earlier research at VUW (Boddy & Neale 1999) tracked for three years the student experience of those whose first year of full time study at VUW was 1996. Study skills were anticipated to be a major area of difficulty for over a third of the incoming Maori (35.5%) and Pacific Nations (36%) students. At the end of their first and second years there was increased concern about this aspect of their university experience. By the end of their third year there was a substantial decrease in the number of both Maori and Pacific students still identifying difficulties with study skills although the numbers replying at this stage were too small to draw any definitive conclusions.

Hall and Te Punga Somerville (2010) suggest from their research, that with targeted tutorials the environment is the key and thus those involved need to be mindful of the space created and the culture around the purposes of the tutorials whether or not the tutor is themself Maori or Pacifica. As with other research, they suggested when dealing with equity issues, it is the problems that need to be addressed rather than trying to ‘fix the student’. The importance of lecturer support for MPI initiatives is crucial as is whether students can opt in to MPI tutorials, are positively prompted about the choice they have, and whether such tutorials are supplementary. They have anecdotal evidence from some staff that MPI tutorials for their course/s have aided the retention of MPI students throughout the trimester.

**Method**

The Faculty of Commerce and Administration (FCA) has trialled dedicated Maori/Pacifica (MPI) tutorials in the four large 100 level courses (QUAN, ECON, ACCY, MARK) as an equity initiative to meet VUW’s strategic goals around the retention and achievement of Maori and Pacifica students.

In an initial scoping exercise I met with staff associated with MOI tutorials. In trimester two 2010, I met with the MPI tutorial groups - ACCY 111(2), ECON, QUANT and MARK (1 each) - to broadly discuss with the students their perceptions of the targeted tutorials and their general experience of university. Subsequently I interviewed the four tutors and 18 individual students. A brief email survey was sent out to 1st year MPI students by the undergraduate administrator for Victoria Management School to supplement the data on the general university experience to which 18 students responded (15% response rate).

**Results**

As noted above, one of the main issues in the first year at university is the sense of alienation students can feel when they are part of a large class where they possibly do not know other students and are not known by their lecturer/s. Tutorials to some extent counter this aspect by ensuring that students get to know a small group of class mates as well as a tutor who represents ‘staff’ because they are in the tutoring role but are also ‘like them’ as a student albeit at a more advanced level. As one of the tutors commented

*Role modeling is an important aspect. Students feel they can approach me more easily than a lecturer because they identify with you*

The small number of MPI students taking commerce subjects/degrees was seen to be an issue and students commented that this could be a result of *schools not pushing these students* and *the good job and career prospects,* and that this was an issue particularly in low decile schools. One student indicated that if she *hadn’t moved [town], wouldn’t have come to university as my parents didn’t go.*

**MPI Tutorials**

MPI tutorials are offered as an equity initiative to meet VUW’s strategic goals around the retention and achievement of Maori and Pacifica students as discussed above. Students were asked why they had or had not chosen to attend these tutorials. Some students were under the misapprehension that these were additional to the usual ‘mainstream’ tutorials, which is what occurs in Law, and thus made the decision not to go to MPI tutorials based on that assumption as the quotes below illustrate.

*I chose not to take MPI tutorials mainly because I feel I have enough tutorials/workshops/lectures to go to in a week – plus I feel that I had a firm enough grasp on the material.*

*I felt confident that the MGMT tutorials were enough for me to learn appropriately.*

Others considered the mainstream tutorials were more appropriate.

*I was happy just to join the usual tutorial streams. I also don't 'look' Maori or PI so may have felt an outcast if I did*

*I stick to the mainstream as I prefer to work with everyone as that mirrors everyday life and I don’t have a confidence problem.*

While one student commented *I'm not entirely sure why I didn't take up the offer of MPI tutorials - maybe next year.*

Based on prior experience another student said

*I chose not to do MPI tutorials because I found that the environment was a lot more casual and therefore students were not compelled to contribute any ideas to the discussion.*

In direct contrast another said

*I chose the MPI tutorial because I knew that* [tutor] *was taking the tutorial. I have had him before and really enjoy his teaching style.*

As this evaluation was taking place in trimester 2 some students had had the experience of both MPI and non-MPI tutorials and thus were able to make a comparison between them.

*I’ve always chosen mixed tuts before as MPI students can be too shy to reply and it’s good to have the different ideas others bring in but this one [MPI] is fine.*

The reasons why people chose MPI tutorials clustered around attributes of the tutor, *tutor makes the difference,* perception of other ‘like-minded’ students, *people with same background,* and the environment created, *more open,* as the following sample of quotes illustrates. The qualities of the tutor that were appreciated included

*Passionate about what they are teaching you*

*Can often put things in an easier/more simple way – don’t ‘dress it up’*

*Holds you accountable for preparation and that way you can see where you’re at*

*Has a helping ethos*

*Really worthwhile as you’re getting help from those who have done it before*

The comments around the aspect of similarity was neatly summed up by one student saying

*[Its] less intimidating as there are very few MPI students and it’s good to have somewhere where our culture is understood*

The environment created in MPI tutorials relied on the skills of the tutor as well as the number of students participating.

*More comfortable because of the size*

*Good idea especially for those who have another 1st language*

*More opportunity to ask questions even though our tutor moves through the material fast*

*Most effective way to learn in small groups as it puts you on the spot*

*I like how [tutor] will usually do more discussion in groups than other tutorials that I attend.*

As with any tutorials there needs to be *a balance between having lots of interaction and some people who dominate* and *it helps to do the homework.* A less useful result was that for one student comparing tutorial types, who in *mainstream tutorials feel embarrassed if I’ve not done the prep* with the implication this was not the case in the more relaxed atmosphere of the MPI tutorial.

**Tutorials in General**

MPI students, whether attending MPI tutorials or not, highlighted a number of aspects that they considered contributed to effective tutorials. Again attributes of the tutors were key as the following selection of comments attest.

*[Tutor] is really straight to the point so it makes things clear*

*The tutor is pretty funny, makes things relaxed.*

*The tutor answers questions that we don't know and provides more information on the materials that are difficult to understand.*

*Our tutor was not teaching us unnecessary work that we already knew which saved us a lot of time.*

*Tutor was quite explicit and made sure we knew to get As or A+s you didn’t just use the textbook*

And one student indicated that *feedback from friends points to real inconsistency of standard with some tutors who just cover the content and aren’t available for consultation*

The way in which tutorials were run also had an impact.

*Good chance to meet and share ideas with other like minded students - also good to get feedback on tests/assignments.*

*Being able to interact in discussions with fellow students enabled me to process and learn clearly what we were talking about in the tutorial.*

*We do quizzes for the first 15mins of the tutorial, which gets our brains working and keeps me on up to date with the lectures and readings.*

*Start by having to say one thing you learnt during the week and what you want to know*

*Worksheets really helpful for focusing and understanding the material*

There was also quite a bit of discussion around whether tutorials should have marks allocated for attendance and/or participation, and whether they should be compulsory or not.

*When they don’t have a proper structure but you have to go it’s not a learning experience*

*Also that they weren’t compulsory so I could decide whether to go or not based on how confident I felt about the material.*

*The best thing about the tutorials was that you got marks for attending*

The negative aspects of tutorials were not necessarily the obverse of the positive features though there was some commonality such as the way some tutorials were run.

*The only thing I don’t like is that [tutor] will have to usually go over all the content in a lot of depth, even parts not that important, because a lot of people will not have prepared.*

*The huge amount of time that our tutor would spend answering one person’s question while the rest of the class had to wait which wastes everyone else’s time. If one student has a question that no one else has, which requires a lot of the tutor’s time, this should be done outside of the tutorial or after it. It is very frustrating as a student to go to a tutorial and wait for half an hour while the tutor spends his time on one student.*

The content could be problematic.

*What’s expected of a student to get done for tutorials can sometimes be lots to get done in one week and also balance it with other subjects*

*The tutorial preparation can have very unclear instructions which makes it difficult especially at first.*

And for others problems related to classmates

*The worst thing would be that people in them are so quiet compared to my other major (Pols) where everyone is so opinionated. There tends to be less discussion in commerce tutorials.*

*In my mainstream tutorial people put up their hands to answer a question and when the tutor gets the right answer they move on so not everyone contributes*

**What the Tutors Say**

The tutors interviewed had been tutoring for between two and four years and over that time had been involved with both mainstream and MPI tutorials. They commented that with the MPI tutorials there was more interaction as they tended to be smaller and this lead to them getting to know their MPI students a bit better with the bonus that *direct concerns can be dealt with individually.* They stressed that they tended to do the same preparation and content/delivery for the MPI and mainstream tutorials *maybe because of the topic area being covered*. However, one tutor tried *to personalise to the particular ways of their learning which is possible with the smaller groups* and pointed out that the s*tandard is set by the students who participate. In one tut they prepare really well and the other doesn’t so I’ve had to change strategy for them.* They also emphasised the importance of MPI sitting *alongside mainstream tuts - it’s a choice and not remedial as for Law*

The tutors were conscious that the environment they created in their MPI tutorials was particularly important.

*Because they are a minority there is an assumption they are less able so may feel judged therefore more nervous in case they are wrong*

*Want a place where they can talk as that’s how they learn - others prefer to listen as they’re scared to talk because they’re shy*

As one tutor pointed out MPI students have the same potential as others and to succeed *all students need to have an interest in the subject regardless.*

The tutors observed that while in the mainstream tutorials students tend to come as individuals, in MPI tutorials they often come as groups of friends and this can contribute to the atmosphere. The interaction between MPI students is considered to be valuable and even when there are not established friendships the *students network with each other.*

*The 1st year can be reasonably isolating, even though there are tons of students. In terms of establishing friendships it’s beneficial if students are in the same tut as well as in the same lecture stream.*

Tutors considered that whether tutorials were weekly or fortnightly it is *helpful to see the same people and have some sort of minimal attendance requirement*. When they were

compulsory the *majority of students did turn up even if they didn’t want to be there.*

The administrative staff had indicated that it was not always easy to get suitable tutors for the MPI tutorials and there was a mix of MPI and non MPI. Commenting on this the tutors felt that it needed to be *someone who was comfortable with the culture, language and identity* thus *someone who understands the culture rather than necessarily being of that culture.* Theadvantage in being MPI was the *role modelling* and that *students approach you more easily than the lecturer because they identify with you*.

*In the 1st year it’s less intimidating for students and knowing that the tutor is Maori and has been sitting where they are creates solidarity*

However, one cautioned on the need for *balance as you can’t be on their level*.

While the University Teaching Development Centre has been trialling specialist MPI tutor training this has not reached all the tutors involved as tutors commented that there was *no specialist tutor training* and that it would be useful if *some cultural norms were identified for tutors so as not to make errors*.

In summing up the tutors reflected on MPI tutorials and their delivery and commented that *the first few sessions set the tone* thus the *need to ensure that we put a premium on engagement rather than just straight presentation.* They considered that *from the second year onwards MPI students have more confidence and get more out of study.* And finally

*If the MPI students have more involvement with the lecturer or were more involved generally they would commit themselves to their study*

**Suggested Improvements**

***Tutorials***

MPI students identified aspects of tutorials that could be improved.

*Maybe for every tutorial, in all courses, have a mandatory tut prep worksheet so that everyone can communicate their answers and ideas on the topic in a more prepared manner.*

*Perhaps for tutorials it could be good if there was a point of discussion for each week that people knew about and could prepare for, just to make classes more interesting. Not sure how easy that would be for some papers but it could be an idea*

*With few MPI tuts and not very good time slots it’s a disincentive and difficult to get in*

One mature student who had had experience of both MPI and non-MPI tutorials considered that it was *essential for 200 and 300 level [to have designated MPI tutors] when you’re moving from the basics and still need someone to go to – checking rather than teaching* This builds on the experience of another student who pointed out that while she was comfortable to seek advice from other students in her MPI tutorial when seeing them around campus it was not the case with students from her mainstream tutorials.

**Conclusion**

It can be seen from the above that MPI tutorials are generally meeting the needs for which they were established. The concerns expressed and experiences of the MPI students tend to mirror those identified in the literature review. The Faculty of Commerce and Administration benefits from having students who are usually undertaking career-directed study. This provides them with a sense of purpose and incentive to make their time at university ‘work’ for them. Both the students and the tutors indicated areas for improvement as well as aspects that worked well in terms of enhancing learning. Some of the suggestions relate to good practice more generally. Specialised training (or an introductory session) for tutors who take MPI tutorials would be appreciated and UTDC may be considering this already. Further it might be useful to monitor statistics available on Maori and Pacifica students to see whether those attending MPI tutorials have the same or different rates of success compared to their cohort as a whole and to MPI students who attend non MPI tutorials, with the caution that this should not be the only measure of success given the issue of retention. Finally a key consideration is to ensure that MPI tutorials are presented as part of the ‘mainstream’, though aimed at a particular cohort of students, and not seen to be dealing with some kind of deficiency on the part of MPI students.

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