

**PACIFIC UNIVERSITY GRADUATES IN NEW ZEALAND:
WHAT HELPS AND HINDERS COMPLETION**

Reremoana Theodore^a, Mele Taumoepeau^b, Karen Tustin^c, Megan Gollop^d,
Charlotte Unasa^e, Jesse Kokaua^f, Nicola Taylor^g, Sandhya Ramrakha^h,
Jackie Hunterⁱ, Richie Poulton^j

^aNgāpuhi, Te Arawa, PhD, Senior Research Fellow and Co-Director of the National Centre for Lifecourse Research (NCLR), Department of Psychology, University of Otago, PO Box 913, Dunedin 9054, New Zealand, moana.theodore@otago.ac.nz

^bPhD, Senior Lecturer, Department of Psychology, University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand

^cPhD, Research Fellow and Director of the Graduate Longitudinal Study New Zealand (GLSNZ), NCLR, Department of Psychology, University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand

^dPhD, Senior Research Fellow, Children's Issues Centre, University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand

^eStudent, NCLR, Department of Psychology, University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand

^fPhD, Research Fellow, Division of Health Sciences and NCLR, University of Otago,
Dunedin, New Zealand

^gPhD, Associate Professor and Director of the Children's Issues Centre, University of
Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand

^hPhD, Senior Research Fellow, Dunedin Multidisciplinary Health and Development
Research Unit (DMHDRU), Department of Psychology, University of Otago, Dunedin,
New Zealand

ⁱPhD, Senior Lecturer, Department of Psychology, University of Otago, Dunedin, New
Zealand

^jPhD, Professor and Director of the DMHDRU, Co-Director of the NCLR, Co-Principal
Investigator of the GLSNZ, Department of Psychology, University of Otago, Dunedin,
New Zealand

Abstract

Increasing the numbers of Pacific Island students who graduate from New Zealand universities is important for the students' futures, their families, communities, and society in general. In the present study, Pacific graduates ($N=365$) who are participants in the Graduate Longitudinal Study New Zealand were asked to describe what factors helped or hindered their qualification completion. Graduates from all eight New Zealand universities were surveyed between July and December 2011. Pacific graduates identified external (for example, family), institutional (for example, university staff), and student/personal (for example, motivation) factors that both helped and hindered the successful completion of their studies. Understanding the hindrance factors faced by Pacific students and the factors that have contributed to their educational success can help to inform policy and practice to achieve national priorities of equity and successful outcomes for Pacific learners.

Key words: Pacific Island students, university, higher education, tertiary education, graduates

Pacific Peoples, made up of Polynesian, Melanesian and Micronesian immigrants from 22 Pacific Island nations, comprise 7.4% of the total New Zealand population (Statistics New Zealand, 2014a). The term ‘Pacific Peoples’ refers to a multi-ethnic, heterogeneous group with cultural and historical diversity, including recent diasporic communities and New Zealand-born Pacific Peoples (Anae, Anderson, Benseman, & Coxon, 2002). The numbers of Pacific Peoples entering into and succeeding at New Zealand universities have increased substantially over the last 10 years. The percentage of those with a bachelor’s degree or higher rose from 5.4% to 8.9% between 2005 and 2015 but remains substantially below that of Europeans (20.7%) and other ethnic groups (35.2%), not including Māori (indigenous New Zealanders, 9.9%) (Ministry of Education, 2015). Fifty eight percent of Pacific students complete their qualifications within five years of starting full-time study compared to 74% of all students (Tertiary Education Commission, 2014). These figures suggest an ongoing need to increase the numbers of Pacific students completing tertiary qualifications at higher levels.

Educational disparities for Pacific Peoples compared to other New Zealanders begin early in life, continuing throughout formal schooling and into tertiary education (Ministry of Education, 2014). Differences in outcomes for Pacific Peoples are due to a complex combination of factors. Pacific communities, similar to Māori communities,

have greater unemployment, lower incomes and fewer assets when compared to other New Zealanders (Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, 2015; Statistics New Zealand, 2014b). A current New Zealand tertiary education priority is to improve Pacific tertiary and labour market outcomes with Pacific learners succeeding at higher levels, at least on par with other learners (Ministry of Education, 2013; Tertiary Education Commission, 2014). There is evidence that the skills and knowledge gained through higher education confer private benefits for individuals, including increased earnings, as well as social benefits for their communities, such as increased civic participation (for example, voting) (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2013). As such, equity in education will have long-term implications for New Zealand, particularly in terms of social cohesion, equality of opportunity and economic growth and development (Marriott & Sim, 2014).

Pacific Peoples are a young and fast-growing sector of the New Zealand population (Statistics New Zealand, 2014a). In the future, there will be increasing reliance on the contribution that Pacific graduates make to the social wellbeing and economic success of New Zealand (Ministry of Education, 2013; Tertiary Education Commission, 2017). Although there is little research on Pacific graduate outcomes, according to one recent study, having a tertiary qualification may reduce inequalities in earnings and employment between young Pacific and their counterparts. For example,

young Pacific university graduates were more likely to be employed and earned slightly more five years post-graduation than their non-Pacific graduate peers (Mahoney, 2014). In contrast, Pacific Peoples in the general population are more likely to be unemployed and have lower median annual incomes compared to national rates (Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, 2015; Statistics New Zealand, 2014b).

Given the far-reaching benefits of higher education, identifying factors that support Pacific university participation, retention and completion in New Zealand is an important endeavour. In a systematic review of research with Pacific Peoples in tertiary education, Anae and colleagues (2002) identified factors that facilitated success and that acted as barriers within three broad spheres of influence: External, individual and institutional. Further evidence has reinforced the importance of these spheres for Pacific tertiary success. At the external level, family is a key support and vital source of motivation for Pacific students (Chu, Abella, & Paurini, 2013; Perrot, 2015; Toumu'a & Laban, 2014). Great importance is placed on education within Pacific communities (Anae et al., 2002) and Pacific parents report wanting their children to have a quality education and having high expectations for them (Education Review Office, 2008). In turn, Pacific Island tertiary students report a desire to make a contribution by giving back to their families and communities and see education as a way of attaining a secure collective future (Airini et al., 2009; Chu et al., 2013). Pacific students are often first-

generation tertiary students, meaning that while they are educational role models, they may lack institutional understandings and their families may not be familiar with the demands of university study (Anae et al., 2002; Mayeda, Keil, Dutton, & 'Ofamo'oni, 2016). Another key issue for Pacific students is having to leave their studies to find work to support their families (Benseman, Coxon, Anderson, & Anae, 2006; Chu et al., 2013; Luafutu-Simpson, Moltchanova, O'Halloran, Petelo, & Uta'i, 2015; Penn, 2010). Although financial difficulties impact on participation, course completion and university experience, these difficulties can be ameliorated with financial advice, assistance and support (for example, scholarships) (Toumu'a & Laban, 2014). Researchers have also described how Pacific Island students have to balance their commitments to their families, communities, work and church and how this can affect academic progress (Benseman et al., 2006; Zepke, Leach, & Butler, 2011). At the same time, having a strong religious or spiritual faith has been described as a protective factor (Toumu'a & Laban, 2014).

Individual helping factors include good time management, good study skills, being able to access help with academic courses, goal setting and clarity, perseverance and determination, and having a strong reason for being at university (Luafutu-Simpson et al., 2015; Perrot, 2015; Toumu'a & Laban, 2014). Conversely, shyness and lacking self-confidence or motivation have been described as hindering factors (Ali & Narayan,

2016; Benseman et al., 2006; Chu et al., 2013). A recurring theme is adequate preparation for academic study, including good academic achievement and acquiring effective study skills at secondary school (Kokaua, Sopoaga, Zaharic, & van der Meer, 2014; Madjar, McKinley, Deynzer, & van der Merwe, 2010; Wikaire et al., 2016).

Institutions also have an important role to play in addressing the inequalities observed in the participation, retention and completion of Pacific learners and can undertake this in a number of ways. First, having culturally-responsive and appropriate pedagogies that acknowledge the worldview of the student and incorporate Pacific models, metaphors and language have been shown to be important for Pacific student success (Ali & Narayan, 2016; Benseman et al., 2006). Second, and on a related note, there is a need for more Pacific staff and role models, as well as positive, respectful and nurturing relationships between Pacific Island students and all staff, who set high expectations of students and have meaningful understandings of Pacific culture and identity (Benseman et al., 2006; Chu et al., 2013; Davidson-Toumu'a & Dunbar, 2009; Mayeda et al., 2016; Toumu'a & Laban, 2014). Third, Pacific associations, events, spaces, services and programmes can promote a Pacific presence on campus and environments where Pacific language, values and culture are the norm (Benseman et al., 2006; Chu et al., 2013). Fourth, peer groups and mentors that provide mutual support and encouragement within the university environment are also helpful for Pacific

students (Curtis et al., 2012; Mayeda et al., 2016). Taken together, in order to support practices that benefit Pacific students and drive institutional changes that address inequalities, Pacific governance and leadership in tertiary education is crucial (Tongati'o, 2010; Toumu'a & Laban, 2014).

Despite the significant gains that research has made in identifying factors that are important for Pacific learners' success, most studies to date have been unable to employ large sample sizes or focus on more than a few disciplines. A current Pacific education research priority is to make better use of existing data, including large-scale cross-sector studies (Ministry of Education, 2012). There are few large-scale, representative, longitudinal studies of graduate experiences and outcomes, particularly ones that follow Pacific Island participants. The Graduate Longitudinal Study New Zealand (GLSNZ) is an ongoing, longitudinal project that, over a 10-year period, investigates the outcomes of graduates from all eight New Zealand universities (Tustin et al., 2012). Previous GLSNZ research has identified key helping and hindering factors for Māori university graduates (Theodore, Gollop, et al., 2017). In the present study, we build upon previous work by identifying what helped and hindered the course completion of hundreds of Pacific Island university graduates.

Methods

Participants and procedure

Participants were members of the GLSNZ, which has been described in detail previously (Tustin et al., 2012). In brief, baseline sampling was conducted across all eight New Zealand universities between July and December 2011. A representative sub-sample ($N=13,343$) of potential 2011 graduates, stratified by university, was randomly selected. Comprising approximately 36% of the expected total 2011 graduate population, those identified were invited to participate in an online baseline survey and three follow-up surveys over the next decade. All international PhD students, and all students from the smallest university (Lincoln), were invited to participate. Of the randomly-selected sub-sample there was a 72% response rate. Participants were those enrolled in a programme of study that would have allowed them to graduate with a bachelor's degree or higher after the successful completion of their studies in 2011. A conservative criterion of full survey completion (400+ questions) was required for ultimate inclusion in the GLSNZ, resulting in a founding cohort of $N=8,719$ to be followed over a 10-year period.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants. The New Zealand Multi-region Ethics Committee approved the baseline survey in 2011. Eligible students were

contacted by letter and email. Non-responders and non-completers were sent multiple reminder emails, and contacted up to four times by trained call centre staff. Pacific participants who were slow to complete the survey were contacted by Pacific call centre staff. Pacific individuals and groups at the individual universities were consulted and the questionnaire was piloted with Pacific students. The multidisciplinary GLSNZ research team includes Pacific and non-Pacific researchers who developed the questionnaire and who undertake the data analyses and report writing.

Of the founding cohort of 8,719 participants, the current study focuses specifically on $n=365$ Pacific participants (4.2% of the total sample). This sample includes those students who reported Fijian Indian ethnicity ($n=24$), who may participate in Pacific student support service programmes in New Zealand and have been included in research by others on Pacific university student success (Sopoaga, Zaharic, Kokaua, Ekeroma, Murray, & van der Meer, 2013). Ethnicity was self-reported using a standard New Zealand Census question, which allows multiple ethnic identities to be selected.

Measures and analysis

Baseline survey information was collected across a broad range of domains including: General and background characteristics; university experiences; aspirations, goals, and

values; earnings and assets; health and wellbeing; personality; and community involvement (Tustin et al., 2012). In the present study, we examined survey information on hindrance factors and facilitators of university success. Participants were asked “Are there any key factors that hindered the completion of your qualification?” and “Are there any key factors that helped the completion of your qualification?” These questions were developed after piloting took place with Pacific students, who suggested that this type of question be asked. Of those who responded “yes,” open-ended spaces were provided for participants to detail those factors.

For analytical purposes, a content analysis was undertaken on participants’ text responses. A detailed coding scheme to classify participants’ responses into categories was derived inductively using a thorough process of ongoing revision and refinement (Thomas, 2003). If participants indicated more than one factor that helped or hindered their qualification completion then each factor was coded. For example, if a participant stated, “I got depressed after my father died,” then this was coded as two factors: ‘mental health’ and ‘death/bereavement.’ Multiple incidences of the same factor, for example, ‘the support of my mother and my sister was helpful’ was coded only once as ‘family support.’ The coding process resulted in 51 codes for key factors that helped and 80 codes for key factors that hindered qualification completion. These codes were then collapsed into broad categories (as outlined in Tables 1 and 2). All of the

participants' responses for the total sample ($N=8,719$) were coded by one coder (who developed the coding scheme). A second coder independently coded 16% of the responses for the total sample to assess inter-rater reliability. Agreement between the coders was 84.9% (Cohen's $\kappa=.84$) and 82.9% (Cohen's $\kappa=.82$) for the helping and hindering factors, respectively.

Results

Characteristics and background of Pacific graduates

The background and characteristics of participants in the GLSNZ have been described previously (Tustin et al., 2012), including findings for the $n=365$ Pacific Island participants (Theodore, Taumoepeau, et al., 2017). In brief, of the Pacific participants who took part in the 2011 baseline survey: 69% were female, 50% were the first in their immediate family to attend university, 32% had children, 62% were undergraduates, and their average age was 29 years. For domain of study, 50% were studying Humanities/Education, 18% Commerce, 14% Health Sciences, 12% Science/Engineering, 3% Law, and 3% PhD study.

Information on the factors that helped or hindered Pacific Island graduates to complete their qualifications are presented in three ways. Firstly, the percentage of those whose responses fell into key categories are displayed in Tables 1 and 2. Secondly, we detail and describe what types of responses are included in the categories. Finally, we use direct quotes from the participants to exemplify and illustrate the categories and to elaborate on key themes. Pacific researchers, together with a Pacific summer student, oversaw the interpretation of responses by the Pacific participants and the selection of direct quotes.

Factors that helped qualification completion

Sixty-seven percent ($n=245$) of Pacific Island graduates detailed key factors that helped qualification completion, which fell into 13 broad categories (Table 1). The percentages displayed in the table and presented in the text reflect proportions of those participants who outlined factors that helped them to complete their qualification.

<Insert Table 1 about here>

Table 1: Factors that helped Pacific university graduates ($n=245$ participants) to complete their qualifications

Broad Categories	Percentage of participants
Family	46.5
University–Academic	30.6
Student/personal factors	22.9
Friends	22.0
University–Other	13.9
Religion	9.8
Financial	8.2
Partner	7.3
Other support	7.3
Peer support	6.5
Employment	5.3
Therapy	2.0
Childcare	0.4
<i>Miscellaneous</i>	3.7
<i>Unclear</i>	2.0

Note: Participants could provide multiple responses which could be categorised into more than one factor, hence percentages do not sum to 100%.

For Pacific graduates, *family* (46.5%) was the most frequently-described factor that helped qualification completion. This category included general references to family, family members, family as a source of love and encouragement, and expectations from family members that motivated students to be successful. For example, one female postgraduate (participant 714) commented on having “*continuous support from my family*” and another female undergraduate (participant 723) described “*emotional support from family.*”

Family were also a source of motivation. A male undergraduate (participant 694) who was a parent described his desire “*...to be [a] role model for my kids, encourage them to do better than I [have].*” Another male undergraduate (participant 781) described the “*experience [of] being poor so it keep[s] me going to make sure I achieve what I go [to] uni for and to make my family proud. Lift us to another stage.*”

University-Academic factors (relating to academic matters) were the next most frequently-mentioned factor (30.6%) that helped qualification completion. This category included comments about the support of supervisors, lecturers, tutors, and mentors: “*My supervisors were absolutely professional, proactive, resourceful and provided meaningful and useful advice*” (male postgraduate, participant 521).

Academic staff who were understanding, empathetic, enthusiastic, friendly, respectful and approachable helped to motivate students: *“Lecturers were very friendly and approachable. A good lecturer makes ALL the difference in succeeding in a course”* (male postgraduate, participant 400), as were *“...lecturers/tutors who are very understanding and respectful of issues around cultural and personal [matters]”* (male undergraduate, participant 525). Similarly, a female postgraduate (participant 150) said:

“I had lecturers who went out of their way to ensure that I got assignments done. I recall one lecturer who heard that I was going to quit – and it was my final paper and final assignment. She came to my workplace to encourage me to keep going.”

Student/personal factors were identified by 23% of participants and included comments about personal attributes and behaviours like confidence, commitment, determination, effort, self-belief, perseverance, and a fear of failure. For example, a female undergraduate (participant 614) emphasised, *“My own determination to get a degree so that I can earn enough money to look after my family financially.”* Hard work, good organisation and attitudes, and setting goals were also identified. A male undergraduate (participant 362) described his commitment to his studies that included,

“Having a morning routine that starts at 6am. Setting goals and making plans to achieve them.”

Graduates also described being motivated by future benefits, including career aspirations, getting a better job and being successful in life generally: *“Building on my cultural heritage. Creating a unique identity for myself”* (female undergraduate, participant 640). Having prior life and work experience were also identified as key helping factors.

Support, encouragement and motivation from friends (22%) both within and outside of university were identified as helping graduates to complete their qualifications: *“Good friends and developing a reliable study group”* (female undergraduate, participant 704). In addition, peer support specifically within the university environment was also mentioned by 6.5% of graduates: *“[Ethnic students’ association] learning from my peers – other Samoan/Pacific Students at Uni”* (male postgraduate, participant 752). A female undergraduate (participant 608) commented on *“the amazing, motivated and very helpful people in my class,”* which included support and advice from older students as mentioned by a female undergraduate (participant 141), *“Pasifika support groups within the university – given extra tutorial sessions by students who were a year or a semester ahead of us.”*

University-Other factors included generic references to the university or non-academic university staff (for example, course advisors, administrators) who provided guidance and support, and university facilities, resources and services. For example, “*The Pasifika support and Post grad learning centres*” (male postgraduate, participant 643). Pacific student support services and staff (including those within academic divisions), Pacific support groups and Pacific communities on campus were identified as key influences that helped graduates to complete their qualifications. One female postgraduate (participant 275) reported “*alot [sic] of support from the pacific island support workers at [university].*” Participants also mentioned Pacific admission schemes and equity programmes, for example, “*...the support of the Māori and Pacific Admission scheme*” (female postgraduate, participant 111).

For 9.8% of the participants, religion played an important role in their university success. They described how their church, faith, spirituality, or belief in God and/or Jesus Christ helped them to complete their qualifications. A female postgraduate (participant 900) said “*...of course God’s grace has brought me this far and through it all.*” Another female undergraduate (participant 825) shared the following:

“Personally for me, it has been my trust and faith in the lord that has helped me through my journey as a student. Who has guided me to this very day. I return all glory and praise to him.”

Other, less frequently-mentioned factors that helped students to complete their qualifications included financial support (8.2%), support from partners (for example, boyfriends/girlfriends) (7.3%), and employment (5.3%). Participants made reference to student allowances, student loans, scholarships, financial support from parents or employers, already having financial security due to previous employment, and Work and Income New Zealand (who provide national employment services, including benefits and financial assistance). Being employed, and having employers and work environments that were supportive and flexible were also regarded as helpful.

Factors that hindered qualification completion

Forty-four percent of Pacific graduates ($n=160$) described key factors that hindered qualification completion, which were classified into 13 broad categories (Table 2). The percentages displayed in the table and presented in the text reflect proportions of those participants who detailed factors that hindered qualification completion.

<Insert Table 2 about here>

Table 2: Factors that hindered Pacific university graduates ($n=160$) completing their qualifications

Broad Categories	Percentage of participants
Family responsibilities	33.8
Student/personal factors	31.9
Financial	21.3
Health	12.5
Employment	12.5
University-Academic	8.8
Time pressure	8.1
University-Other	7.5
Bereavement	6.9
Lack of support	5.0
Interpersonal relationships	4.4
Residence	2.5
Pregnancy/birth	1.3
<i>Miscellaneous</i>	6.9
<i>Unclear</i>	1.9

Note: Participants could provide multiple responses and these responses could be categorised into more than one factor, hence percentages do not sum to 100%.

Family responsibilities was the most commonly-stated (33.8%) factor that hindered qualification completion. This included comments about family commitments, and family-related issues: *“Family situations; death, relationships, not necessarily factors at university”* (female undergraduate, participant 627). One female undergraduate (participant 983) described *“family problems – took a gap year to help out family thus delaying a year of my degree.”* Participants also described raising children, single parenthood and caring for family members, including those with health problems. For example, a female postgraduate (participant 816) noted that *“family commitments, sometimes my children’s health, often get in the way.”*

A lack of family support (for example, emotional support) and balancing family life with study and/or work were also mentioned: *“Family commitments, lack of support or understanding of study requirements, pressure to earn money to keep up with household expenses”* (female undergraduate, participant 656).

Thirty-two percent of Pacific graduates who identified hindering factors described personal factors, such as lacking motivation, drive, or self-belief. Feeling isolated, not asking for help or seeking help too late, shyness, being unsure of what to study, lacking study skills, poor study habits, disorganisation and issues with time management also hindered completion. One male undergraduate (participant 896)

shared that *“I have very little knowledge and skills [in the] analysis and interpretation [of] research information.”* Being underprepared for university study was also a hindrance: *“Not understanding the transition from High School and University, and assuming I could put in the same effort and study in the same way as I had in High School”* (female postgraduate, participant 175).

Procrastination, immaturity and socialising or partying were also outlined as key hindering factors. Failing a paper or practicum, changing majors, subjects or degrees also made qualification completion difficult.

Over a fifth (21.3%) identified financial issues as hindering their qualification completion. Participants described issues with money, finances, high student fees, student loans and allowance issues, and university costs (for example, fees and textbooks). For example, a male undergraduate (participant 777) said:

“Inability to purchase course material due to student loan/allowance issues, and personal family issues. Also, distance played a key role, as [a] considerable amount of time and money is spent travelling to and from lectures.”

Participants who were parents described the financial pressure of having to pay for childcare in order to study. Working while studying for financial reasons and studying part-time also hindered course completion. For example: *“It’s harder to get any kind of financial assistance for part-time students, [you] have to be full-time”* (female postgraduate, participant 771).

A broad range of health issues (physical and mental) were detailed by 12.5% of Pacific participants. Examples included one male undergraduate (participant 550) who described *“Rugby injuries that caused depression.”* Problems with alcohol and stress were also mentioned.

Employment was identified as hindering qualification completion by 12.5% of participants. This included having to work (full-time or part-time), and associated issues with work/study balance. One female postgraduate (participant 314) reported *“work and study because of the need to maintain an income.”*

Moreover, Pacific graduates identified multiple, inter-related factors that impacted on their studies, describing the challenges of managing employment, parenting, finances and church commitments: *“Trying to balance full-time teaching, raising children and studying at the same time”* (male postgraduate, participant 785). A

male undergraduate (participant 271) described, *“Family, cultural, religious expectations as well as adversities that I myself have to overcome.”* A female postgraduate (participant 489) shared the following experiences:

“Change with work such as restructures that have affected my ability to commit to study for a year or semester, juggling my young family commitments with children; aging parents, finances and whether employers support studies.”

University-Academic issues were identified by 8.8% of participants. Participants described communication issues with supervisors and lecturers, for example: *“Some lecturers not responding to queries or telling us that you should know”* (female undergraduate, participant 737). Programmes that were disorganised and courses that did not equip students with skills that were transferrable were also described as hindering factors: *“Unaware of transferable work skills gained through study. No clear link or relevance of course content with real world job environment”* (male undergraduate, participant 416).

In addition to academic factors, 7.5% of the Pacific graduates identified other university factors that hindered their qualification completion, including issues with non-academic staff, lack of student support and issues with the university environment.

For example, one male undergraduate (participant 717) participant noted “*Racial discrimination.*” Administrative issues, poor course advice, and lack of availability of courses/papers were also identified, for example: “*Very little advice on what papers to take. Lack of incentives for university to give advice on courses ... Lots of students take irrelevant papers/change degree 1-2 years in*” (male postgraduate, participant 400).

There were a number of other hindrance factors that impacted on qualification completion for Pacific graduates including bereavement (6.9%); a general lack of support (5%); interpersonal relationship difficulties, such as marital problems (4.4%); residential issues (2.5%); and pregnancy/birth (1.3%).

Discussion

Understanding what does and does not work for Pacific learners can help to inform policy and practice to improve Pacific higher education outcomes through supporting and investing in effective approaches (Ministry of Education, 2013, 2014; Tertiary Education Commission, 2017). In this large, national study of graduate outcomes, hundreds of successful Pacific graduates described what helped and hindered their qualification completion. Of those who identified helping factors, nearly half described family support, love and encouragement as important for successful completion. Participants described being motivated to build better lives for their families and to act as role models. Conversely, family responsibilities, including raising children and supporting the wider family, was the most commonly-described hindrance to course completion.

Our findings from this national survey provide further evidence for the crucial role that Pacific families play in higher education success (Chu et al., 2013). Institutional understandings about the family responsibilities of Pacific students are crucial. The current tertiary education strategy (Tertiary Education Commission, 2017) outlines the need for community-focused public awareness campaigns that give Pacific students, families and communities the right information at the right time. This includes

information on higher education options and requirements, tertiary pathways and employment opportunities. Half of the Pacific graduates in our study were the first in their family to attend university. These students are educational role models who carry the hopes and dreams of their families and communities (Chu et al., 2013). Their families, however, may have less experience or knowledge of tertiary institutions, which may limit their ability to help students navigate university systems (Mayeda et al., 2016; Perrot, 2015). Government organisations and tertiary institutions need effective strategies for engaging with Pacific families and communities. For institutions, such strategies can include promoting Pacific student success through a variety of media, providing resources in different Pacific languages, and actively engaging with the Pacific communities through outreach programmes like family evenings, Pacific orientations, Pacific student celebrations and community functions (Airini et al., 2009; Chu et al., 2013). Having a strong Pacific presence on campus (for example, fono (meeting) rooms) provides a sense of place and community for Pacific Peoples on campus, and facilitates cultural events, exhibitions and community engagement (Horrocks, Ballantyne, Silao, Manueli, & Fairbrother, 2012; Luafutu-Simpson et al., 2015; Perrot, 2015).

In the present study, Pacific graduates described a range of student/personal characteristics, skills and attitudes (for example, determination, setting goals,

enthusiasm for one's course) that helped course completion. This result aligns with previous research on the importance of a personal commitment to success for Pacific students (Chu et al., 2013). Conversely, student/personal factors, such as lacking motivation and self-belief, hindered completion for Pacific graduates in the present study. Toumu'a and Laban (2014) also found that Pacific Island university students placed considerable weight on the importance of personal factors. Some Pacific graduates in our study described lacking academic preparedness (for example, study skills). Combatting this under-preparedness is important given that first-year pass rates predict student retention and degree completion (Meehan, Pacheco, & Pushon, 2017). Moreover, Madjar et al. (2010) found that successful transitions from school to university are important for retention and completion, as are adequate academic preparation, guidance at school, and goal setting. Shyness and not asking for help were mentioned by Pacific graduates in the present study as hindering factors. Compared to traits of assertiveness and individualism, these more modest behaviours have been previously described by Pacific students as being deliberate and appropriate, and rooted in cultural beliefs surrounding the notion of saving face (Chu et al., 2013; Davidson-Toumu'a & Dunbar, 2009). Overall, although student/personal factors are often characterised as individual factors, educators and staff can also support students to overcome confidence or motivation issues by acting as positive self-concept and self-

belief builders and helping students to look ahead to brighter and better futures (Perrot, 2015).

Pacific graduates in the present study described having multiple inter-related obligations, including parenting, study, and employment that impacted on course completion. This finding replicates that of previous GLSNZ research with Māori graduates showing that balancing these types of commitments puts students and their families under considerable pressure (Theodore, Gollop, et al., 2017). Moreover, research suggests that these commitments may disproportionately affect Pacific and Māori students compared to other students (Zepke et al., 2011). Financial pressures and the need to work can limit study options and impact on students' experiences of university and their course completion (Chu et al., 2013; Mayeda, Keil, & Mills, 2012; Tertiary Education Commission, 2017). Financial support services for Pacific students, culturally-specific scholarships, and maintaining and extending financial support for Pacific students have all been identified as strategies that could alleviate some financial pressure for these students so that they can concentrate on their studies, thereby increasing their academic success (Chu et al., 2013; Mayeda et al., 2012). From January 1 2018, New Zealand students who finished school in 2017, or during 2018, will qualify for one year of free tertiary education. How this impacts on completion rates for Pacific students should be a focus of future research.

Although there is limited research examining the role of religion in supporting Pacific university students, it is important to recognise that a number of Pacific graduates in the present study described faith, spirituality and the church as important in helping them to complete their qualifications. This aligns with research showing an association between student wellbeing and religion and spirituality (O'Brien, Denny, Clark, Fleming, Teevale, & Robinson, 2013).

In relation to institutional factors, having strong relationships with approachable, respectful, professional and understanding staff (for example, supervisors, lecturers and tutors) were described by nearly a third of Pacific students who identified key helping factors. Previous research highlights the importance of quality, culturally-appropriate and responsive student-centered teaching that respects and affirms diversity and the cultural identity of the student (Airini et al., 2009; Benseman et al., 2006; Perrot, 2015). In this way, incorporating Pacific content into Pacific-based and mainstream courses and papers as well as recognising the cultural values and capital of Pacific students is crucial (Luafutu-Simpson et al., 2015). At present, there is a national need for more Pacific academic staff (Chu et al., 2013). Note, however, that staff of any ethnic background can also play an important role in Pacific student retention and completion (Toumu'a & Laban, 2014). Institutions should, therefore, provide better targeted academic and general staff development, including training on positive engagement

with Pacific students, which can result in increased understandings and appreciation of Pacific concepts, culture, and issues (Penn, 2010).

Other institutional factors that Pacific graduates described as helping course completion included support services and staff. Graduates identified specific Pacific groups, communities and associations on campus, including Pacific admission schemes, equity and mentoring programmes as key helping factors. Research to date overwhelmingly supports the positive impact that Pacific cultural spaces have on Pacific students' success and their sense of connectedness to universities (Horrocks et al., 2012; Kokaua et al., 2014; Luafutu-Simpson et al., 2015; Mayeda et al., 2012). These types of spaces, sometimes referred to as counter-spaces, help to build community that can reflect the students' home community (Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009) and provide safe havens within mainstream institutions where Pacific culture is the norm (Airini et al., 2009). As such, they can counter feelings of alienation and social isolation that occur within large institutions (for example, very large class sizes) (Airini et al., 2009; Toumu'a & Laban, 2014). These spaces can also include resources to support student learning like prescribed textbooks and past exam papers, group study spaces, and printers (Wilson, Hunt, Richardson, Phillips, Richardson, & Challies, 2011). Pacific cultural spaces and tutorials are also beneficial in that they nurture interdependent learning and the formation of supportive relationships between peers (Airini et al.,

2009; Luafutu-Simpson et al., 2015). In the present study, we found that friends and peers within the university environment played key roles in helping Pacific graduates to complete their qualifications.

Overall, the present study adds to the body of research showing that external, institutional, and student/personal factors all influence Pacific university success. The strengths of the study include the large sample size and the inclusion of participants from all eight New Zealand universities across the full range of disciplines at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. With regard to limitations, the survey was online; face-to-face interviews or focus group discussions may have garnered more in-depth responses. The research focused on qualification completion and may not have captured the factors that help or hinder students to begin and maintain tertiary study. Due to the methodology of the study as an online survey with a focus on all New Zealand university graduates, we were unable to follow conventional Pasifika methodologies such as talanoa (to tell a story or have a conversation). Despite this limitation, we felt that it was important to present data on what facilitates university success for Pacific students given the large number of Pacific participants in this study and the current Pacific research priority of utilising large datasets (Ministry of Education, 2012). This has given a Pacific voice to opinions that would ordinarily be lost by presenting these results for the cohort as a whole.

In conclusion, by understanding the realities that Pacific students face and the factors that have contributed to their higher education success, universities can better position themselves as culturally-responsive institutions for Pacific students, their families and communities. This information can also be used by policy makers to support institutions to scale up faster what is shown to work in supporting engagement and participation of Pacific learners to achieve national priorities of equity and successful outcomes.

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Glossary

fono	meeting room
Māori	indigenous New Zealander
Pasifika	indigenous peoples of the Pacific Islands
talanoa	to tell a story or have a conversation

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